

PLUCK AND LUCK

COMPLETE
STORIES OF ADVENTURE.

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NEW YORK, JULY 29, 1903.

Price 5 Cents.

WIDE AWAKE WILL • THE PLUCKY • BOY FIREMAN OF N°3! OR, FIGHTING THE FLAMES FOR FAME AND FORTUNE.

By EX-FIRE CHIEF WARDEN.



Through the smoke he staggered. Then he heard a tempest of cheers. Out upon the snowy swart he staggered. Before anyone could touch him he had flung aside the fireman's cloak and gazed inquiringly at the white face on his arm.

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Wide Awake Will, THE PLUCKY BOY FIREMAN OF No. 3;

OR,

FIGHTING THE FLAMES FOR FAME AND FORTUNE.

By Ex-Fire Chief Warden.

CHAPTER I.

WHICH INTRODUCES WIDE AWAKE WILL.

A smarter, livelier place than the beautiful little city of Benton it would be hard to find on the American or any other continent.

Its people were intelligent, progressive and high-toned to a marked degree. Its streets were broad and scrupulously clean, its buildings neat and handsom in architecture. It was a model city.

No political ring existed there, no bribery, no demagogism to pervert the public moneys or squander the revenue. The city officers were nominated and elected by acclamation, which was a guarantee of purity of office.

Thus we find the charming city of Benton a few weeks before the opening of our story. But had it always remained in that remarkable condition, the incidents of our narrative would never have been written.

A cloud rose above the horizon of Benton's prosperity. At first it was the proverbial size of a man's hand, but it rapidly grew larger.

It soon overspread the entire sky, and tumult and turmoil, insecurity and almost terrorism took the place of former harmony.

Benton had boasted a fire department. As in all things, this was a marvel of efficiency and equipment.

But thus far it had maintained almost entirely an ornamental and honorary position in the community, for fires were few and far between.

The fire boys of Benton were all of a fine class of young men, leaders in society, and foremost in business interests. There were several companies, but the leader of all was acknowledged to be No. 3.

Within two weeks, however, there had been on an average three fires per day. At any moment an alarm was apt to be sounded, and in all cases the blaze was undoubtedly of incendiary origin.

After several days of this sort of thing Benton was stirred to its very core.

Almost a panic was created. It became a moral certainty that a firebug was at work! nay more, that an organized gang of incendiaries were seeking the destruction of the town.

Their identity and their purpose was a mystery which baffled the keenest of efforts to solve.

Detectives and police were utterly at sea. No property owner felt safe. Everybody feared that he would be the victim of the next visitation. A perfect reign of terror ensued.

And the fire boys were nearly dead from their arduous efforts to preserve the town, which seemed doomed.

Already three of the handsomest buildings had been gutted. Dwelling houses had suffered, and in nearly every quarter of the town the villainous incendiary had left his fearful mark.

To add to the discomfiture of the situation, a hard winter was just setting in. Already a heavy snow storm had visited the town and was knee deep in the streets.

It was extremely difficult to pull the engines a mile or more, or in fact any distance through the clogging snow. By the time the company reached the fire nearly all would be exhausted.

At this juncture the sentiment of popular indignation arose. The citizens en masse waited upon the Mayor, Alden Morse, and demanded that extreme measures at once be taken to remedy matters.

The city council was called and stormy scenes ensued. The Mayor, who had been just elected to office, was not as popular as his predecessor, Carter Needham, who had resigned his office on account of pressing business interests.

But Alden Morse was one of the wealthiest citizens of the town, and this perhaps was why he had been selected. His previous reputation had been that of a snug man, in plain terms a skinflint.

This mistaken idea of parsimony had led him to refuse to put on sufficient salaried men in the Fire Department.

"Better pay double the salaries!" cried one liberal citizen, "than to suffer such great losses by fire!"

"But we cannot be extravagant," declared Morse, resolutely. "I shall run the city's interests as I have run my own, upon a safe, conservative basis. Let the citizens take hold and help the firemen."

Jeff Morse, the mayor's son, had served as foreman of No. 3. He was a surly, high tempered fellow, and had proved very unpopular with the members of the company.

Three months previous he had been requested unanimously to resign by the members of the company. This was the result of certain improper conduct upon his part which perhaps it would be well to explain in opening our story.

No. 3 had taken a trip down the river to favorite picnic grounds, and, as usual at the firemen's picnic, a large crowd was present.

It was then beautiful summer weather. Certain outdoor sports had been arranged in which the fire-boys took part.

There was to be a foot race, two hundred yards' dash, and Jeff Morse was one of the contestants.

He was quite a lively sprinter, but there was one other member of the company whom the majority were disposed to believe could beat him.

This was a handsome, athletic young fellow named Will Wade. So bright and smart was he that he had won the merited pseudonym of "Wide Awake Will."

At all the fires Wide Awake Will was bound to distinguish himself. Wherever danger threatened the most he was sure to be found. Always in the thickest of the smoke, always at the top of the ladder, ready and willing to take any daring chance, he was truly "wide awake."

Will Wade was a poor boy and supported an aged and devoted mother. There had been a day when the Wades were foremost in Benton.

Indeed, this same Alden Morse had once been clerk for James Wade and later his business partner.

There were rumors of business wrongs, that Morse had defrauded Wade heavily. However this was, the partnership was dissolved, leaving Wade very poor, while Morse became suddenly wealthy. Shortly after this Wade died.

These things were not unknown to Will Wade, and his father's wrongs, as rehearsed by his mother, had long burned in his bosom. He was a manly, honorable young fellow, but he would not have been human to fail to espouse his dead father's cause.

The natures of the two young men, Jeff and Will, were essentially antagonistic.

It was Jeff's position and wealth which gave him precedence in the company. Will was the most popular.

When it was known that Wide Awake Will and Jeff were to coontest in the two hundred yards dash, at once great interest was aroused, and the other contestants dropped out.

"No use," said one of these. "We can't beat those fellows. They are too speedy for us."

When Morse heard that Wide Awake Will was his opponent his keen eyes glittered with a cold, hard light.

"I'll beat him or die," he gritted. "I think I can do it."

At that moment Will was standing some yards away, with his hat in his hand, talking with a very sweet and charming young girl, no other than Grace Needham, the daughter of the ex-mayor.

Grace was the belle of Benton society, and well she merited the position. She had dozens of admirers, and Wide Awake Will was somewhat abashed in her presence, though she treated him with marked liking.

Morse was watching the two with jealous eyes. He made aspirations for the favor of the charming Grace, but she had ever met his advances coldly.

"Well, I never!" he muttered, harshly. "See how she will favor that young upstart, and yet she scorns me. Confound

him! He had better not stand in my way! But I'll take his colors down in the foot race."

"Indeed Mr. Wade," Grace was saying to the plucky young fireman, "I have no doubt you will succeed in any walk of life which you may choose. But do you expect to win fame and fortune as a fireman?"

"I have always had a presentiment, Miss Needham," said Will, earnestly, "that I should win fame and fortune fighting the flames. I shall consecrate my every effort to that end."

"Ah," said the young girl, laughing, "I fear you will have to seek a wider field than Benton. Fires are rather scarce there."

"It does not follow that there may not be a great conflagration there some time," said Will, almost prophetically; "then you will see our fire boys at the front."

"And then I know I shall see you distinguish yourself," said Grace, with a winning and confident smile. "I wish you success."

A few moments later Will was called away to prepare for the foot race; he was soon ready.

In light athletic suits the two contestants appeared at the starting line. There seemed little to choose between them.

But a close student of form would have selected Wide Awake Will as physically the superior. His muscles seemed of a finer order.

A great crowd was gathered to see the start. The two athletes waited the word to go.

Then it came.

Away they flashed like silent shadows flying down the cinder track with the speed of a whirlwind; on and on, neck and neck, so to speak.

The crowd as one tense excited body watched their progress. Excited exclamations could not be restrained.

"What a pretty race! They are even now! Well matched, aren't they?"

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

"See! Morse goes to the front—he leads—no—Will is saving himself. They are at the one hundred and fifty yard post."

But a connoisseur could see that Will Wade was loafing fifty yards from home. Suddenly the crowd become tumultuous. Wide Awake Will shot forward like a deer and had passed his opponent in the last twenty-five yards, winning with ease.

Morse could hardly realize that he was beaten. He staggered forward to where his trainers were. He heard the plaudits of the crowd, saw Will Wade carried upon their shoulders, and the fury of a baffled maniac seized him. In a frenzy he muttered:

"Curse him! I'll kill him for it!"

At that moment the crowd had brought Will quite near. With a black oath Morse picked up his coat, pulled a revolver from the pocket, drew deliberate aim at the victor and fired.

With a quick, sharp cry Wide Awake Will fell from the shoulders of his friends.

CHAPTER II.

THE LOST DEED.

It was the act of a malicious, high-tempered young scoundrel. Even as he fired the young wretch repented his rashness.

The effect can scarcely be described. For a time it could hardly be realized that Wide Awake Will had actually been shot. In that brief time the craven would-be assassin had escaped.

The bullet had struck the young fireman in the muscles of the shoulder, inflicting a painful, but not a fatal wound.

He was quickly carried home and cared for by a legion of friends. The excitement over the affair was intense.

Only Mayor Morse's position and influence saved his erring son then.

As it was, he was let off with a heavy fine and a reprimand. But his resignation from Fire Company No. 3 was unanimously requested.

He figured no longer creditably in Benton society.

Everybody shunned him. This, however, only increased his hatred for his victorious young rival, as he considered Will.

As for Wide Awake Will, he recovered after a brief illness and became more popular than ever.

A meeting of the company was called, and, despite his youth, he was elected foreman of the company and presented with a beautiful silver trumpet.

Among those who most warmly congratulated him was fair Grace Needham.

"I have become sure that you will succeed," she declared. "You have made a good beginning, Will Wade. I trust that you will win your fame and fortune, as you hope."

"To have gained your interest and good wishes," said Will, gallantly, "is worth more to me than all."

Grace blushed and averted her gaze, but experienced a sensation unlike that of any compliment she had received from other lips.

She was not yet old enough to understand the sentiment of love. But she liked Will Wade much.

And now at the opening of our story we find Wide Awake Will as the foreman of No. 3, with plenty of opportunity for carrying out his avowed purpose, for fires were plenty, and he was occupied continually in fighting the flames.

His example was an inspiration, and No. 3 were the lions of the hour.

The famous deeds of bravery they had executed, and their efficient service had become the wonder of the town.

Upon every hand Wide Awake Will was saluted as a prince would be, and there were many who realized that the safety of their homes in his hands was safe. They had the most implicit confidence in him.

One day Carter Needham, the ex-mayor, was walking along when he heard the clangor of a bell and saw a line of men, bedraggled and well exhausted, hauling No. 3 engine along.

The company had just returned from a fire, and at their head, helping tug on the rope, was Wide Awake Will.

Needham paused to look at the fire heroes, and murmured:

"Upon my word that Will Wade is a hero! But for him our city would be in ashes. But he comes of good stock. Jim Wade was a noble man and the son is like him!"

Then the ex-mayor paused. A sudden thought had come to him.

He crossed the street and entered the engine house just as No. 3 was hauled in. He waited until Wide Awake Will had changed his apparel, and then approaching him, offered his hand.

"Will Wade, as one of the citizens of this afflicted town I wish to extend to you my gratitude for your noble efforts. Rest assured you will never be forgotten."

"Indeed, that is pleasant for me to hear," said Will, modestly, "but I fear you do me too much credit."

"Not half what you deserve. But I wish to speak with you upon a certain matter, Will. I knew your father well. He was a very dear friend of mine. The matter I have in mind concerns what would be for you a great fortune, and which I honestly believe belongs to you."

Will was astonished.

"Indeed, sir!" he exclaimed. "I don't know as I understand you."

"Well, you know the Eureka Gold Mine some twenty miles above here?"

"Yes."

"Before your father died he was the reputed owner of that. It was then undeveloped and thought not to be worth much."

"Very true, sir," said Will, eagerly. "Alden Morse has since developed it, and——"

"Taken a fortune out of it! Yes. Now the mystery is, how did Morse ever come into possession of it?"

Will shook his head.

"I do not know, sir. You know he has a deed, purporting to be signed by my father, giving him exclusive ownership."

"Which I believe to be a forgery," said the ex-mayor, peremptorily. "Don't mention this again, lad, but I believe the gold claim justly belongs to you and your mother."

Will gave a choking cry.

"That is my mother's belief," he declared. "In fact, she has seen the deed of it owned by my father, and which Morse claimed never existed."

"Ah, if you knew where to find that deed!"

"It cannot be found. It has disappeared very mysteriously. Ex-Mayor Needham stroked his beard a moment thoughtfully.

"The deed never was recorded?"

"I think not. Father did not consider it of much value."

"There's just one thing about it," said Ex-Mayor Needham, forcibly. "I believe those Morses, father and son, are rascals. They are not fit to hold public office. There will be an issue at the polls in the next election, be sure."

Wide Awake Will had put on his coat.

"Mr. Needham," he said, in a vain attempt to suppress his excitement, "I thank you much for kindly interest and——"

"My boy," said the ex-mayor, earnestly, "I want to help you. I mean to stand a friend to you. I believe there is legal redress for you. If only that will could be found. I would like to see and talk with your mother. Are you going home now?"

"I am, sir," replied Will, joyfully. "And mother will be delighted to talk with you. Will you not come along?"

"I think I will."

Together they left the engine house.

Wide Awake Will's home was an humble but neat little tenement in a side street near.

Will opened the door and was met by Mrs. Wade, who was a fine looking woman with matronly beauty of a superior type.

She greeted the ex-mayor warmly, for they had been school-mates in early years.

"I thought I would come around and see you, Mary," said Mr. Needham, as they were seated in the cozy little sitting room.

Then the object of the visit was explained.

Mrs. Wade was much excited.

"Carter, we were school friends," she said, earnestly. "And you know I would not tell an untruth. As true as Heaven, I believe that Alden Morse forged that deed."

"So do I!" cried the impulsive ex-mayor, emphatically. "And by my honor I'll prove it yet, too. If you could only find the original deed."

"I presume Morse destroyed or secreted that before forging the present one."

"How could he have got it?"

"Easy enough. He had access to all Mr. Wade's private papers. They were partners, you know."

"Well," said the ex-mayor, earnestly, as he rose to leave, "I am going to adopt some certain measure of tracing this piece of rascality down. I tell you the sooner the Morses are run out of Benton the better for the town."

"Amen!" said Will, decidedly. "I have no respect for either one of them."

But before any could speak again a startling sound rang out upon the air. It acted upon the three like an electric shock. Clang! Clang! Clang!

Fire! Fire! Fire!

The cry came from the street. The air was filled with the din of the bells.

"Fire!" gasped Mr. Needham. "Mercy on us! So soon after the other!"

Mrs. Wade sank half fainting into a chair. The ex-mayor rushed to the door.

But Wide Awake Will, alive to duty at the very first tone of the bell, was off like a bullet.

He had just dragged himself home, as had the others of the company, from a disheartening fight with the flames. He had not had time to partake of his dinner.

Yet he was the first at the engine house. Close behind him came the other members of the company.

"Ready! Take a line!" rang from the young foreman's trumpet. "Now we're off!"

Out into the snow dashed the fire engine. With hearty cheers the company rushed down the street.

It was a long and hard run, but even before they reached the scene, Will saw Ex-Mayor Needham rushing frantically along, and looking up beheld a soul-stirring sight.

It was the fine mansion of the ex-mayor that was now in flames.

The incendiary had struck a shining mark. As No. 3 dashed past him, the mayor staggering along, shouted to Will:

"Oh, save her! Save my child, my darling Grace!"

A terrible faintness for a moment seized Will Wade. He nearly fell, and one of the fire boys caught him by the arm.

"What's the matter, chief?" he asked. "Are you done out?"

But the next moment Will was all right. He had seemingly the courage and strength of a hundred lions.

"Never!" he cried, heroically. "I am all right. Forward all!"

With a cheer the company reached the scene. They were the first on hand.

In a jiffy the hose connections were made, and the boys were pumping for all they were worth.

But Wide Awake Will had called to mind the beseeching cry of Needham. The young fireman's soul burned.

Was Grace Needham in that blazing building? Was she in such deadly peril of her life?

It seemed to Will as if no power could resist him in the rescue.

Not a question did he ask, not a moment did he hesitate. He never knew whether it was divine inspiration, instinct or chance which led his footsteps; but he always believed it to be the former.

Into the burning house he rushed.

Smoke and flames met him.

They were no barrier for him. Through them he went blindly. Now he was suffocating, and went down upon the floor.

He crept along until he reached some stairs; half way up he experienced a thrill.

A presence was near him. Across the stairs lay a delicate form. He could not see her.

But he needed not this. He knew by instinct, by the merest touch, one convulsive cry.

"My God, you are not dead, Grace! You must live!"

Then with a yearning sob he caught the light form up in his arms. His fireman's cloak was swept over her head that she might not breathe the deadly flames.

She lay limp and quiet in his arms. Was she dead? With a fervent prayer and a mad resolve the boy fireman started to find his way to the outer air. But there came a crash and a sensation of falling.

CHAPTER III.

AT THE BALL—THE ALARM.

The fire-eaten stairs had given way. Down went Will and his precious charge. Flames were for an instant all about him.

In that moment he half believed that her fate was sealed.

But really it was the saving of their lives. The head of the stairs became a vortex of flame.

The draught for a moment cleared the smoke in the lower hall. Will was enabled in that moment to see the door before him.

He picked himself up, and clinging madly to his charge, made for the goal of safety.

Already he felt a draught of pure air.

It filled his lungs and gave him strength. On he rushed now.

He reached the threshold. Through the smoke he staggered. Then he heard a tempest of cheers.

Out upon the snowy sward he staggered. Before any could touch him he had flung aside the fireman's cloak and gazed inquiringly at the white face on his arm.

In after years Will recalled that moment.

It was his firm belief that he would have dropped senseless upon the spot had he seen those lovely features disfigured by the flames.

But they were not.

There was a faint happy smile on the young girl's face, and the first flush of returning consciousness.

Will took one rapturous gaze. Then other arms claimed the prize. Mr. Needham, frantic with joy, had grasped Grace, and cried:

"Will Wade, you have won my gratitude for life. I will never forget you. Saved! My darling child! Oh, speak to me!"

The rescued girl was carried by loving hands to a neighbor's near by, and speedily regained her consciousness.

While Will Wade led his company in the battle against the flames as unconcerned as if he was not the hero of the hour and the cynosure of all eyes.

The fire was bravely conquered by the united efforts of the fire companies. Only part of the splendid mansion was gutted.

It could no doubt be restored as good as ever with the necessary expense. Weary and yet exultant, the fire boys returned to their quarters.

The evening newspapers came out with glowing headlines. Wide Awake Will was roundly praised for his noble work.

There was one who read the account with unpleasant sensations.

This was Jeff Morse.

"Confound that young puppy," he said to his father. "He is trying to run the whole town. Can't we shut off his wind in some way, father?"

"I'd like to," said Alden Morse, sententiously. "I don't like him at all."

"Why, I should think it would be easy enough."

"How?"

"You are mayor of this city. Haven't you anything to say about the Fire Department?"

"Yes, but No. 3, you know, has a charter of its own and is supported by a trust. The city cannot control that company."

Jeff took a turn up and down the room with his hands in his pockets, and a cigarette in his teeth.

"I tell you, dad," he said, finally, "there's no use in concealing the fact from you any longer. I'm in love with Grace Needham. I want to make her my wife."

"Well, my boy," said Morse, blandly. "I approve of your

choice. Simply mention the matter to her and I've no doubt you'll win."

Jeff made a wry face.

"Ah, there's the devil of it," he exclaimed. "She won't agree to it."

The mayor's spare form straightened.

"What!" he exclaimed, "the daughter of Carter Needham refuses the hand of my son! That cannot be true!"

"But it is," said Jeff, sullenly. "And who do you think gets more favor from her than anybody else?"

"I can't imagine."

"Why, this same young upstart, Mr. Will Wade."

A shadow crossed Alden Morse's face. Something like a devilish light shone in his eyes.

He stroked his beard a moment.

"Well, Jeff," he said, finally, "I think we can find some way to bring things out all right. Wait awhile and I think you will find a way to gain your ends."

Jeff donned his hat and went out on the street. He was in the act of passing a store window when he saw a showbill displayed:

"TICKETS HERE
FOR THE
GRAND BALL OF NO. 3!
BE SURE AND ATTEND!"

"That's to-morrow night, in the hall over the engine house," he mused. "There'll be a swell crowd there. Ah!"

A peculiar shadow flitted across his sensual face. A deadly light shone in his eyes.

"She will be there," he mused. "She will dance with him. Curse him! I shall not be welcome, for I was kicked out of the engine company. Curse the whole lot of them."

His teeth snapped viciously, and he was about to turn away, when a swift thought struck him. He looked at the bill again.

"To-morrow night," he muttered. "I wonder if I can't spoil that affair. On my soul, I'll try."

He turned away with a fiendish expression upon his face. He was just about to pass the door of a drinking saloon when a man came staggering out.

He had a brutish cast of features, and was a genuine type of ruffian. He paused at sight of Jeff.

"Dang my boots, lad! I'm glad to see ye!" he said, thickly.

"Joe Sullivan!" exclaimed Jeff, tensely. "Drunk again, are you?"

"Not more'n half seas over. What's the word, my lad?"

Jeff looked up at the sky. There were indications of a snow storm in the air. He motioned to the ruffian and said:

"Come into the shadows here. I've some work for you to do."

The snow storm did come. That night it fell to the depth of several inches.

But happily there was no alarm of fire that night or the next day. The ball of No. 3 was to be largely attended.

At the appointed hour the guests began to arrive.

The little hall and the engine house as well were finely decorated and lit up.

First the guests inspected the famous engine, and then proceeded upstairs to the ball room.

In due time ex-Mayor Needham came with Grace upon his arm. The young girl looked a queen in her ball costume.

As she passed up the stairs she gave Will a smile which made his nerves tingle.

"She is very beautiful," he thought, and then deeply sighed, "but, ah! I hope her life may never be marred by a shadow."

These were his words, but underneath all was a subtle disappointment, which cut to his heart like a knife, for his best sense told him that she was upon a far higher plane, and at

that moment he did not see how he was going to elevate himself to it.

But a swelling thought came to him.

"Perhaps I shall fight my way to fame and fortune through the flames. I will certainly try."

Shortly after the dancing had begun, Will appeared upon the ball room floor. He instinctively sought the side of Grace.

"Well, you dilatory man!" she said, poutingly. "Why have you not put in an appearance before? I have been looking for you."

Will's veins quickened madly.

"You have."

"Yes. I have reserved my first dance for you. The music is just starting."

"You were kind," said Will, with wildly throbbing pulse.

"Why should I not be to him to whom I owe my life?"

There was a depth of feeling in the young girl's voice which thrilled Will intensely.

Strange and impassioned words, which leaped from his impulsive heart, were upon his lips when—

Clang—clang—clang!

"Fire!"

In an instant all was pandemonium in the ball room.

There was no chance for changing of dress suits. The fire boys stripped off their coats and threw cloaks of rubber over themselves. Down into the engine room in a twinkling they slid.

Open flew the doors, out ran the ropes with all the gang on hand.

The young foreman, Wide Awake Will, trumpet in hand, rushed out into the snow at the head of the line, shouting:

"Forward all! We must be the first on hand!"

Cheers went up, the crowd at the windows of the ball room above saw the fire engine flash out into the darkness and the deep snow.

Then all who could started for the scene of the fire.

The ball was broken up for the time being.

CHAPTER IV.

ONCE MORE A HERO.

Wide Awake Will had declared that Number 3 must be the first engine at the fire, and his prediction came true.

It was no light matter to haul the engine through all that mass of snow. But the brave fire laddies bent to it with a will.

Down the street they rushed, through drifts and banks, and now the flames were visible not a block away.

"Another incendiary fire!" exclaimed Luke Tuttle, assistant foreman, who was by Will's side. "It has started in the lower part of the building like all the rest."

"I think you are right," agreed Will, "there will be human life endangered at this hour of the night. Forward all!"

The young foreman gripped the rope himself, and his example roused the boys to a fresh effort.

With a cheer they made a final effort and reached the fire, literally the first on hand.

The fire had started in a tenement house in the most crowded part of the city.

It was of course necessary to subdue the flames in the quickest possible time. From the lower windows the flames were bursting.

People were rushing wildly out into the snow, with such of their belongings as they could save.

But Will saw at a glance that not all the inmates of the block had been aroused.

There were many sleeping in the upper stories whose only warning might be the grip of the fiery demon when it was too late.

"Lively, boys!" shouted the young foreman through his trumpet. "Get a stream of water on. Break in the lower doors. Oh, will the hook and ladder never come?"

Indeed it was plain that much depended upon the coming of the hook and ladder. The truck was long and heavy and necessarily slow.

At this moment there appeared at an upper window a woman with disheveled hair and white features. She shrieked frantically for help.

Will could not stand this.

"Somebody has got to go up there!" he cried; "they must be saved!"

"But it would be madness!" cried Luke Tuttle.

"Are the stairs gone?"

"No, but they are tottering and thick with smoke. Even if a man got up there he would never get down."

"Nonsense!" cried Will, excitedly, "by that time the ladder truck would be here!"

A great throng had already gathered in the street. People flocked from all directions, for the fire had a fearful fascination as usual.

The ladder truck was not yet in sight. Another fire company had arrived and they were helping Number 3.

The vivid light of the flames lit up the snowy street and the adjoining buildings like daylight.

Will saw now with sinking heart that it was going to be impossible to keep the flames in the basement.

The work of the incendiary had been well planned. The whole building must be gutted.

This meant that the lives of those in the upper stories must be sacrificed unless help could reach them and at once.

The windows now became filled with terrified people. The crowd below was swayed with a terrible panic.

Women fainted, stout men turned away sick at heart. What was to be done?

Will had made up his mind to get up the stairs.

He dropped his trumpet and pulled his fireman's hat over his eyes.

"Where are you going?" asked Luke Tuttle, grasping his arm.

"Up there," said Will, vaguely.

"No, you're not; it's folly now. Here is the ladder truck at last."

This was true. Down the street, drawn by panting, nigh-exhausted men, came the hook and ladder. The crowd with cheers helped to drag it to the spot.

And up went the ladders in a jiffy.

Wide Awake Will was the first to ascend one of these. He went up like a monkey to a window far above and brought down a fainting woman in his arms.

Down other ladders the inmates of the burning block came safely to the street. The rescue bid fair to be complete.

But at one of the windows a woman was seen for an instant. Then she disappeared.

Smoke and flame were pouring from the window.

Wide Awake Will saw and guessed the reason of her disappearance at once. She had been overcome by the smoke and had fainted.

There she would remain unseen and perish. But the brave boy fireman had seen her, and meant to save her.

"Put a ladder up to that highest window, boys!" he cried through his trumpet. His order was at once obeyed.

A new interest swayed the crowd. This was to everybody's belief the last person left in the burning building. The crowd always liked to see Wide Awake Will make a rescue.

Up the ladder went the young fireman. Now he reached the window ledge. A great cry went up from the crowd.

The whole window was for a moment filled with a solid sheet of flame. Will was obliged to retreat.

"She is lost!" groaned the crowd.

"Oh, don't say that!" wailed a white-faced, agonized man in the crowd. "She is my wife, and all I have in the world."

A cheer now went up.

The flame had rolled back, and Wide Awake Will was again at the window ledge.

Heavens! Was he mad? How could he dare to plunge beneath that wall of flame, which might in an instant roll back and over him?

But Wide Awake Will had only one thought, and that was to rescue the life which was in such jeopardy. He was willing to brave anything to do this.

So he pushed his way into the smoke and flame enveloped room. He bent low upon the floor and his grasp encountered a human form. It was a woman's body.

Will knew from the warmth and the limpness of her muscles that she was yet alive. Instantly he picked her up in his strong arms and threw one leg over the window ledge.

At that moment the wall of flame rolled back. Only the promptest action saved the young fireman's life.

He sank low upon the ledge and slid out, trusting to chance to grasp the ladder. Fortunately he succeeded.

Swinging himself down he presented a thrilling sight. His clothing was on fire in various parts, and flames seemed all around him.

Yet he hung to his precious burden, and with one arm around the ladder he slid quickly to the ground.

There eager arms received him. Hundreds of human throats cheered his bravery to the echo.

One man rushed through the crowd and seized him.

"There, that is enough!" he cried. "You have done your part well. The fire is under control. Come away and let the others do the rest."

Will's smoke-begrimmed and earnest face lit up with surprise.

"Mr. Needham!" he cried. "You here? Ah, but you ask me to do that which I cannot. It is my duty to stay here until every spark of that fire is out."

Now the husband of the woman Will had rescued rushed to the young fireman's side, offering his thanks.

"If I were only a wealthy man I would reward you otherwise!" he cried.

"Not so!" declared Will sincerely. "I would rather have your honest gratitude than any amount of recompense in the way of money."

Back into the smoke and flame went Wide Awake Will, directing the efforts of his company.

The fire was now under control. Before morning it would be wholly extinguished.

To the last Will remained at his post.

It was daylight when the weary fire companies plodded their way homeward.

After the engine was housed Will went home at once to his mother.

Mrs. Wade had sat up all night waiting for his return with all a mother's anxiety. She met him at the door with open arms.

"My boy, you don't how I worry about you," she said, tremulously. "I am so afraid harm will befall you, and if it should my heart would indeed be broken."

"You foolish mother!" laughed the young fireman. "You should give some thought to yourself and not bestow all upon so unworthy an object as me. You have made yourself ill sitting up this way."

"But I could not sleep. Oh, I have such a foreboding of evil. It seems in the air."

But Will laughed and talked cheerily, and soon his mother was in good spirits again. They partook of breakfast and Will told of the ball and of the fire. Then he said:

"Now, mother, I think I'll turn in for a little while. Wake me up at eleven, please."

Until eleven o'clock Will slept soundly. Then he arose and dressed, had dinner, and started for the engine house.

Upon the way he met many people who congratulated him and showered praises upon him.

"You are the hero of the town, Will Wade," cried one merchant, effusively. "We all depend upon you."

It was pleasant to know that he had so thoroughly won public commendation, and Will resolved to always merit it.

It was now his one desire to track down and bring to justice the gang of incendiaries who were doing their best to destroy the pretty little city.

Thus far his efforts had been baffled at every turn. But this did not cause him to diminish his efforts.

"Time will tell," he murmured; "they cannot always remain at large!"

The streets had been well cleared of snow by this hour. Sleighbells were ringing merrily, and the day was a glorious one.

Will had occasion to pass the door of a large saloon, which bore the name of El Dorado, and was a noted resort for criminals.

He carelessly glanced in through the windows as he passed, and was given a peculiar start.

Two men stood at the bar. One of these he recognized at once.

"Jeff Morse!" he muttered. "And in that den of vice. A short while ago he would not have risked his reputation so. He is, indeed, getting down in the world. If he keeps on he will entirely sink his identity as a man of honor."

But mentally Will reflected that the fellow had never evinced a sentiment of honor anyhow, at least not to his recollection.

Thus reflecting, the young fireman went on to the end of the street, but if he had seen Jeff Morse, the latter had also seen him.

"Joe Sullivan!" he exclaimed, gripping the arm of the man he was with. "Come out here quick."

Sullivan followed him to the door. Jeff pointed to Will's form just turning a corner below.

"Do you know that fellow?"

"It's the young fireman."

"Yes."

"Well, what of that?"

There was a devilish light in Jeff's eyes, as he gritted:

"Well, he stands between me and everything I have in life. I can never succeed while he lives. Do you understand?"

The ruffian, Sullivan, gave his employer an inscrutable glance. They both went back into the saloon to further their dark plots.

CHAPTER V.

THE MAYOR PLAYS A SORRY HAND.

"I tell you we will gain nothing by showing an open hand, Jeff. We have got to win by deep work. There is too much risk in any such scheme."

The speaker was Alden Morse, and his son stood before him in the mayor's office in Benton City Hall.

It was after business hours, and the key was turned in the

lock. The walls were thick, and neither father nor son had any fear of being overheard.

There was a black scowl upon Jeff Morse's dark face.

He had been pacing the floor in an agitated manner. As his father made this declaration he clenched his hands furiously.

"But that is not my way!" he cried. "I am not a schemer. I strike an open blow and mean it. What is the use of dallying and beating around the bush so? We shall get euchred, I tell you."

The mayor drummed on the table with his fingers and studied his son's face in a cold, critical way.

"Jeff," he said, "I am disappointed in you. You will never make a politician. You can never succeed in life."

"I don't care whether I do or not!" cried the young profligate, angrily. "I can never bring myself to your patient underhand games, I tell you. I have got to focus matters, and pretty quick, or I shall give up entirely!"

"Well, what is your focus?" asked the mayor, bluntly.

"Shut off the wind of this young fireman for the first move."

"You mean Will Wade?"

"Yes; the young beggar is getting altogether too popular."

"Ah, but don't you see that that very thing is what protects him. He is in a very hard fortress to storm."

"I think I would very soon find a way if I was mayor of the city."

"And so I could, were it not for the fact that No. 3 has its own charter, and is not controlled by the municipal officials. It is for the fire company to depose him; I cannot."

"Then what are your political talents worth if you cannot bribe or pervert some of the members of the company?"

"They are as united as granite!" replied the parent. "You might as well try to move a mountain. That scheme is impossible!"

"Then what are we to do?"

The mayor's eyes twinkled. He regarded his son keenly, and then said, satirically:

"You are deeply in love with this chit of a girl. This Grace Needham!"

"I am."

"What are your powers of fascination that you cannot bring her to terms in the accustomed way? Why should you let this young beggar of a fireman cut you out?"

Jeff's scowl increased, and an oath dropped from his lips.

"She actually prefers that uncouth pauper, who hasn't money enough to buy him a new suit, to me, who could have any other girl in Benton for the asking. It's incomprehensible."

In spite of his own hatred of Wide Awake Will, Mayor Morse laughed at this statement of his son's plight.

"Then you think that this young fireman is the only obstacle to your successful suit with Grace?"

"Of course I do."

"Couldn't you offer him enough money to make him drop out of the race?" asked the mayor, shrewdly.

"Money?"

"Yes; if he is poor, a few hundred dollars will be more to him than a pretty face. Needham would never let his daughter marry a poor fireman anyway. Only keep cool, lad. There are a good many ways out of the affair. You will yet get back into favor if you are careful."

But Jeff couldn't see matters in this light at all. He frowned and picked up his hat.

"You talk absurdly, father," he said, angrily; "that young puppy actually stakes his life upon that girl. He sees no social distinction. Indeed, since my expulsion from No. 3 he certainly has outranked me socially. Curse him! There is only one way."

It was a fiendish light which shone in Jeff Morse's eyes at

that moment. His father, cool and crafty man as he was, shuddered at it.

"What do you mean, my son?" he asked.

Jeff brought his fist down forcibly upon the table. The veins rose upon his temples like whip cords.

"You will understand when you hear by and by that Will Wade, fireman, has very mysteriously disappeared. Then the path will be clear to me."

The door closed behind Jeff as he turned the key and passed out. Alden Morse sat for a moment with a kind of horror upon his craven soul.

Then with a sudden impulse he rushed to the door.

"Jeff, my boy, come back here," he cried. "I want to talk with you."

But no answer came. Jeff was far beyond hearing.

Alden Morse returned to his desk and tried to busy himself with some important papers.

But the subject he had just been discussing would obtrude itself upon him. He could not get rid of it.

"Jeff is not like me," he muttered, finally. "I am bitterly disappointed. I am afraid he will be just fool enough to go and do some desperate and foolish thing."

"It would be ruin for us. It must not be. I must fix matters in some way. But how can I do it?"

He was plunged in thought for some while. When finally he arose from his desk there was a light of resolution in his eyes.

"I'll do it," he muttered. "It is for Jeff's sake. I don't care if it does cost me a little something! It will be something quite to our credit to marry into the Needham family. I'll fix it."

At once he wrote a hasty note, and pressing an electric button, summoned a messenger.

"Boy," he said, "take this to the engine house of No. 3. Deliver it personally to Will Wade."

The messenger departed.

Then Alden Morse arose and paced the floor in an eager, confident way.

He pulled his whiskers complacently, and even helped himself to some fine old cherry brandy from a closet near by.

"I only wish my boy had been a politician," he uttered. "But Jeff is for all the world like his mother. All on the surface—nothing underneath."

Meanwhile the messenger had gone down to Engine House No. 3.

He inquired at once for Will Wade.

"He is not here now," said Luke Tuttle. "Anything important?"

"A message from the mayor."

"A message from the mayor, eh?" exclaimed the assistant foreman, in surprise. "That's queer."

Tuttle, bluff fellow, knew that Will was not particularly popular with Morse, and naturally wondered what the wrinkle meant.

But at this moment Will was seen coming down the street.

"Here he is!" cried Luke. "A message for you, Will, from Mayor Morse."

Will was in his turn astonished.

"From the mayor?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," said Luke, with a twinkle in his eye. "Perhaps he means to thank you for the valorous service you have done in the way of putting out fires."

"Well," exclaimed Will, slow to recover himself, "I will answer this at once."

And the young fireman was as good as his word. A few moments later he was at the City Hall.

He rapped upon the door of the mayor's room. It was opened, and he confronted Mayor Morse, who greeted him with a pleasant smile.

"You are prompt, young man," he said, with a warmth of

manner which he had never displayed before. "I am glad to see you."

"Your message called for a prompt answer," said Will.

"That is true. Have a chair. We shall be quite retired here, and it is well, for I wish to discuss with you quite an important matter."

The mayor turned the key in the lock. Will was a trifle surprised.

He did not wholly like the aspect of affairs. He was always averse to secret conversation, and especially with such a man as Morse.

But he seated himself and waited for the later to state his business.

And now for the first time the politic mayor was a little nonplused. A few moments before it had seemed like the easiest matter in the world to browbeat and patronize this young beggar of a fireman.

But Will's cool, steady and masterful gaze discomposed him.

He crossed the room twice and then clearing his throat struck an attitude by thrusting his thumbs into the armholes of his vest and at once begun.

"Well, sir, let us understand each other at once. I am the kind of a man who does not believe in beating about the bush. Let us come to the point."

"Your remarks are not quite clear to me, sir," replied Will.

"They will be. I understand that there is a lack of good feeling between you and my son Jeff."

Will experienced a queer feeling. So this was to be the subject of the conversation. But what was Morse leading up to?

"I believe your son has acknowledged a dislike for me," replied Will, steadily.

"Ahem—hem! Yes; well, I deplore that. Possibly you are both a little in the wrong. However, as your walks in life are so totally different, that need make no difference."

"I do not understand you, sir," said the young fireman, with dignity. "If you have asked me here for the purpose of insulting me, I beg leave to pass that door."

"Tut, tut, tut!" exclaimed Morse, a little flustered. "You are too quick. We will drop that subject and come directly to the point."

"I am sure I wish you would. My time is limited——"

"But I am the mayor. In my official right I demand your time; but enough. You are well acquainted with Miss Grace Needham, the daughter of our ex-mayor, are you not?"

Will could hardly believe his senses. Was the mayor mad?

"Why, I must say that is an odd question," he replied. "Yes, I am honored by her acquaintance."

"Exactly, that is true. Now—er—my son tells me that you have aspirations for her hand in marriage——"

"Sir!" exclaimed Will, hotly, springing to his feet, "this is too much."

"Easy!" exclaimed the politic mayor. "No offense, I assure you. You are perfectly excusable in your ambition, but I take the liberty to inform you now that it can never be consummated. Carter Needham would never consent. There is too great a contrast in your social positions."

Will was powerless in his indignation and astonishment. Indeed, it seemed to him as if he was really dreaming. At first the impulse was upon him to avenge the insult. But Alden Morse was an old man, and, moreover, something in his words stung Will with a certain sense of accuracy.

"There is too great a contrast in your social positions."

Had he not secretly felt this often? Why should this man, the mayor of Benton, feel bound to remind him of this painful thing?

"Sir!" said Will, with a dim consciousness of what he was saying, "I know not your purpose in calling me here and attacking me in this manner, but in justice to Miss Needham, I must refute indignantly the insinuation you confer. There is

not, and has never been more than the commonest of friendship between us, but if there were, I ask you what affair would it be of yours? What right have you to draw the line of contrast between Miss Needham's social position and mine? For the injury to me I care nothing, considering its source, but for the liberty you take with the name of that young lady whose social and every position is as far above yours and your cowardly son's as the sun is above the earth, I could strike you down as I would a dog!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE QUESTION OF EQUALITY SETTLED.

The tableau was a striking one. The fearless young fireman stood there facing the politic mayor of Benton with just wrath in his soul, and a blazing light of righteous indignation in his eyes.

Cool and crafty and secure, as Alden Morse was, he did not like this turn that affairs had taken.

He had plainly misjudged the young man before him. It was not in his craven soul to understand the high standard which this youth's purity of honor had reached.

He had always believed that every man had a price. He reckoned inwardly that this was a politic display of bluster and buncombe upon the young fireman's part. And it was admirably done, too.

In this sense he secretly admired the other. Far from being confounded by Will's angry denunciation, he quickly recovered, and with a chuckle, said:

"There, there! Don't get excited, my young friend. I meant nothing of the sort that you imply."

"Will you state to me your real meaning, then?" said Will. "Only be so polite as to leave Miss Needham's name out."

"Well, I—that is—to tell the truth, my boy, Jeff is in love with her, and—of course it is unreasonable jealousy—he fears you as a rival."

Will's lip curled in scorn.

"Oh, he told you that, did he?"

"Who should he confide in but his father?"

"But I have heard it said that his suit was rejected? He ought to be satisfied."

"Now we are coming to the point. He thinks that but for you and your influence over her, Miss Needham would think kindly of him."

Will drew a deep breath.

"Indeed this is the most astonishing piece of business I ever heard of," he exploded. "Your son is deluded, and——"

"There, there," wheedled Morse, "don't you understand a father's interest in his son? I felt sure that I could arrange matters with you. Of course there is nothing serious between you and Grace. I shall disabuse Jeff's mind of the idea at once. Now, here is a chance for you to make some money. Here is my check for five hundred. You need only assume a cool attitude toward the young lady and——"

Will clinched his hands and took a step nearer. The fury that blazed in his eyes was appalling.

"You old hound!" he cried, furiously. "What do you take me for? How dare you heap insult upon insult? If you were not such an old man, I think—I think I would make you eat the words you have uttered to-day. I see your miserable game. But it won't work. While there may never be anything between us, I would rather see sweet Grace Needham dead than the wife of your son. And as long as I live I will stand between her and your cowardly machinations."

Will took a step toward the door. Maddened, Morse sprang before him. He was like a fiend in his rage.

"What!" he fairly howled. "You dare address the mayor of

this town in such a manner and in his own office? Why, I'll——"

"Stop!" cried the young fireman, masterfully. "I am here by your invitation. In this free country a man is as good as a mayor. I do not think you will always be able to draw that line. Au revoir."

And coolly the young fireman turned the key, opened the door, and walked out. He reached the street quickly.

His blood was in a fever heat. But he understood now just where he stood.

"It has got to be war between us!" he muttered. "They will do all they can to harm me now. And Grace——" a shadow passed over his handsome and resolute young face. "I may not be fit to kiss the ground she walks upon—but—if I am not, surely that wretch Jeff Morse is not."

Then his thoughts went surging bitterly back into the past. It was natural that he should turn his footsteps homeward, and there tell his mother all.

Mrs. Wade listened with indignation to the words uttered by Alden Morse.

"There is no line between us and the Needhams, save the fact that they are wealthy and we are poor. But, my son, the time was when our family was the wealthiest in Benton. Then Alden Morse was poverty stricken enough, and it is by his treachery and rascality that we are here to-day."

"I felt sure of that!" cried Will, passionately. "And—he drove me nigh to madness. Had he not been an old man, I think I would have thrashed him."

Mrs. Wade advanced and placed a soft hand upon her son's brow. She had guessed his secret.

There was something positively angelic in her smile as she looked deep into Will's eyes at that moment, and he never forgot it.

"Will," she said, in a deep, yearning way, "I am better conversant with a woman's heart than you. Social standing or wealth has nothing to do with pure and true love. Souls of a kin will come together despite lock and key oftentimes, and let me impress this fact upon you forever. Never cringe before an alleged superior, for you have none. You are a gentleman born, and the blood in your veins places you upon the same plane, and gives you absolute equality with Grace Needham. A man may be poor and yet a gentleman."

"Those are noble words!" said a deep, full voice.

Instantly Mrs. Wade and Will turned. Carter Needham stood before them, hat in hand.

"I must forever beg your pardon," he said. "I have done a dishonorable thing. I came to your street door, and seeing it open, took the liberty to walk in. I heard my name mentioned, and as you, Will, repeated the words of Alden Morse, I was held speechless and compelled to listen. Will you forgive me?"

"And you heard all?" gasped Will.

"Yes."

For a moment there was a profound silence. The young fireman hung his head, but Mr. Needham reached forward and clasped his hand.

"The words your mother uttered, Will, are noble and true. I am not surprised at the usage you received at the hands of Alden Morse. We will not discuss them, but let me ease your mind upon one point. Grace never has nor never will regard you as her inferior, and while I cannot answer for her, I can say for myself that I would trust her happiness and her life with you sooner than with any other young man of my acquaintance."

Will felt a great choking lump in his throat. He reached forward mutely and took Mr. Needham's hand. Then after a moment he said:

"Perhaps I may be able to prove myself worthy. But do not tell her."

"I will sacredly keep the secret!" said Mr. Needham, with a smile. "Now, Mary, I have come to you with good news."

Mrs. Wade's eyes were brilliant, and her sweet face seemed almost girlish again.

"You are so kind, Carter!" she said.

"I am not half kind enough. But let me tell you. On conference with my lawyer, he thinks it will be an easy matter to offset that claim of Morse's to the Eureka Gold Mine. At least he can make Morse prove compensation, and show that he obtained it honestly. If we could only reclaim Eureka for you——"

"Hurrah!" cried Will, joyfully. "What a turning of tables for Morse. He could hardly preach inequality then."

All laughed heartily. Mr. Needham remained some time discussing the situation.

That evening Will was at the engine house. The streets were again blocked with snow.

There were even then flakes in the air. The sky was overhung and the night was dark.

Suddenly a great cry came down the street. From lip to lip it ran.

"Fire! Fire!"

Then the clangor of bells smote upon the air. In an instant the members of No. 3 ran out the rope.

Once more they were the first on hand. Again it was a blazing tenement house.

But this time, it being early, all the inmates had escaped. At least it was so believed until, just as Will was directing a stream to be thrown upon a certain angle of the building, he glanced up and saw an awful sight.

In a window of the top story was a little girl wringing her hands and crying bitterly. A cry went up from the crowd:

"Save her! Where is the ladder?"

But the ladder truck was late. Flames seemed all about the child. Will did not wait. Into the burning building he dashed.

How he found his way to the spot through all the flames and smoke he never knew. But he appeared suddenly in the window with the child in his strong young arms.

But there was no ladder. What should he do? At that moment flames seemed to envelop the spot.

Will saw but one desperate chance, and he took it. In front of the window were strong telegraph wires. Catching the child's gown in his strong teeth, he leaped and clutched a wire with both hands. It held his weight, and there between heaven and earth upon the slender wire, yet safe from the flames, the young fireman and his precious charge hung, while the crowd below gaped in horror at the sight.

CHAPTER VII.

A THRILLING EXPERIENCE.

It was a critical position Will Wade now found himself in. It had been a desperate resort, and he had half expected to go crashing down to the street.

But the wire held, and there he hung twixt heaven and earth. The child happily made no struggle.

Had not Will possessed good, strong teeth he could not have held it thus by its gown.

And those below were powerless to help him. Will saw that he must do all himself.

The hook and ladder company was just in sight, but he could not hold on until they reached the spot.

His mind was quickly made up.

He saw that the pole was distant from him not more than

twenty feet. He began at once to make his way toward the crossbars.

If the wire would only hold he would succeed. The crowd watched him intensely.

Nearer he drew to the pole. His jaw was weakening with the intense strain upon it, yet he held on grimly.

The wire creaked and strained, but Will knew that it would sustain him if the crossbar on the pole did not break.

He did not look down. He knew the fatality of such a move full well.

Steadily he made his way along the swaying wire. The crowd below were watching him spellbound, and once, when it seemed as if he must lose his grip, a groan surged up from them.

But Wide Awake Will knew full well how much was at stake. Every nerve was strained to the utmost.

And now he felt the crossbar almost within his grip. At this moment a thrilling thing happened.

A long column of flame shot out from the corner of the building, and seemed likely to envelop him.

Will felt the wire growing hot in his grasp. Soon it would be so hot that he could not retain his hold even if it did not break.

So he made one more desperate effort, and now he felt the crossbar in his grasp. His legs closed around the pole.

Then, with one arm around it, and the other around the child, he began the long slide to the ground.

He reached the snow heaped sidewalk safely, but was well nigh exhausted, and relinquished his grip upon the precious charge.

Eager hands took the child, and also lifted Will and carried him to a safer spot. But he almost instantly recovered.

He was upon his feet instantly, with the old flashing light in his eyes.

He ignored all words of praise, all demonstrations of enthusiasm, and hurried back to his post with No. 3. His whole soul was bent upon his duty then.

The fire raged fiercely, and the firemen, for a time, seemed to make slight headway against it.

The block next to it was seriously threatened, and Will saw that active measures must be taken to save it.

Luke Tuttle was at his shoulder at this moment, and shouted:

"Will, did you see any suspicious characters hanging around the corner over there just now?"

"Where?" asked Will in surprise.

"Over yonder!" said the assistant foreman, pointing to the darkness of an alley which extended in the rear of the next block. It was a section within the fire ropes, and any of the crowd would invade it at their peril. Therefore Will's interest was at once aroused.

"Why, that is within the ropes."

"True; but I tell you I saw a couple of skulkers over there!"

"Some of our boys?"

"I don't believe it. Actually I fancy it may be some of the incendiary gang, and that they are trying to give the blaze a spread."

A troubled light came into Will's eyes. But before he could say more on the subject a great shout went up.

"Look out! She falls!"

The east wall of the tenement was blazing and trembling as if about to fall. Will was just under it.

He leaped back with the others.

He was not a moment too soon, for down came the wall with a terrible crash. Fortunately nobody was hurt.

But this was a favorable turn in the affair. It would now be easier for the fire boys to control the blaze.

Already they saw it under control. A great cheer went up.

But Tuttle's words had stirred Will deeply. He was deter-

mined to know if there were indeed skulkers in the alley. He looked about for the assistant foreman.

But they had been separated in the confusion. Will did not see him anywhere.

Realizing the value of prompt action, he did not waste a great deal of time looking for him.

But he started alone for the alley. Unhesitatingly he plunged into its dark depths. As he did so he fancied he saw shadowy forms receding before him.

His blood was fired at once.

"Hold, you cowardly dogs!" he cried. "What are you doing here?"

To the end of his days Will regretted the mistake he made in not having taken an officer, or at least a companion with him into the place.

If he had done so, much of the subject matter of this story would have been lacking, for the suspicions of Luke Tuttle that the real incendiaries were lurking in the dark alley were true.

Wide Awake Will was as fearless as a young lion. The conviction was upon him that the incendiaries were before him, and he thought only of their capture.

A hoarse, chuckling laugh came back to his ears as he rushed on. This only served to impel him on the faster.

He made a dive for a shadowy form just before him.

His fingers closed upon a man's arm. A thrill of triumph pervaded his soul when a hissing cry went up:

"Salt him, Mike! Don't give him a chance!"

Then from behind a lithe form descended upon the young fireman like an avalanche. The weight bore him down.

Wide Awake Will was always lively in a tussle. It ever took a superior wrestler to cope with him.

So now he exerted his skill to wonderful advantage, and doubtless would have had his foes hors du combat speedily had the question been one of strength and agility alone.

But now the same hissing voice cried:

"Curse him! he's like an eel! Don't wait, Mike! Salt him!"

Some heavy object swung up into the air. It descended with a terrible thud upon the young fireman's head.

Wide Awake Will went down like a log. Three shadowy forms bent down over him. One of them laughed jeeringly.

"That settled him."

"Are you sure of it, Mike?"

"You bet!"

"Don't his heart beat?"

"Try fer yerself."

"Yer right. He's dead as a door nail. That's one out of our way, and he's fought us a hard one, that's sure."

"But fer him we'd cleaned out the town long ago."

"Yer right!"

Then the three incendiaries, for that was their number, held a whispered conference. Finally one of them said:

"The time is ripe. Put a torch to the building and let it spread. The wind is dead right to clean out this whole square before morning."

"But what'll we do with this chap?"

"Leave him here."

"No, I've a better plan!" whispered one of the villains. "Heave him through the window there, and let him be cremated. That'll save his relatives the expense of a funeral."

"You're mighty considerate of his relatives, Mike."

"That ain't all. It'll cover up the fact that he was killed, see?"

This settled the argument at once. It seemed to be received with favor by the others. Will's insensible form was lifted and carried to an open window in a deserted chamber of the tenement.

It was a favorable moment for the dark work of the villains. It was at a time when all the tenants were out of the building,

watching the fire next door, and the immediate vicinity was deserted.

But it would not be for long, and the incendiaries knew this.

Soon the alley would be lit up by the flames, which were already extending to the rear of the burning block opposite.

"Quick, Mike!"

"All right, Joe."

Wide Awake Will was lifted lightly and carried to the open window. One moment they rested his body upon the sill. Then he was allowed to fall inside.

Then one of the gang struck a match.

Just beneath the window was a pile of inflammable material. The blaze leaped up instantly.

One of the blazing brands was flung into the chamber. Then the incendiaries disappeared in the darkness.

CHAPTER VIII.

JEFF'S NEW SCHEME.

It was a horrible fate which now threatened the brave young fireman of No. 3. He seemed literally in death's clutches.

The blow given him by his foes had been a hard one, but was by no means fatal, as they had fancied.

It had been a glancing stroke, and cut the scalp, causing the blood to flow freely. The concussion produced unconsciousness.

Will lay for some moments in this deadly stupor.

But even when his foes tossed him into the burning tenement and left him there to die, he had begun to become dimly conscious of his surroundings.

Slowly he came back to himself. As he opened his eyes at first he was unable to remember where he was or what had happened to him.

But the sight of a blazing firebrand at his feet and the walls of a room about him caused him to realize that he was in deadly peril.

But yet he was confused.

He managed to gain strength enough to sit up.

Then gradually the recollection came back to him.

He put his hand to his face. It was drenched with blood.

"My God!" he gasped. "They have fired this tenement and left me here to burn up in it."

Then the resolution came to him to extinguish the fire, even if it cost him his life.

He made a supreme effort and gained his feet.

He staggered forward, and picking up the firebrand, threw it out of the window.

He stamped out the blaze upon the floor.

But he now saw flames mounting up the outside of the window.

The pile of inflammable material left by the incendiaries was doing its work.

Will knew that it was beyond his power to cope with this single handed.

The alarm must be sent to the street.

He staggered to the nearest door for that purpose.

What did it all mean?

Where were the occupants of the building? Were none of them at home?

These questions occurred to him in succession as he vainly endeavored to clear his befogged brain.

The door leading out of the chamber was closed. He had not the strength to break it open.

Then he thought of the window. But flames covered that. However, there was another window and he made for it.

A quick blow dashed out the sash. Then he crept out into the alley, now being rapidly lit up by the new fire.

Will saw that it would speedily be beyond control.

There was no time to lose. He was weak and faint, but he exerted every nerve.

And the throng upon the street beyond were suddenly startled and horrified to see a tall young fireman emerge, staggering from the blackness of the alley with blood streaming over his white features.

There he stood, making excited gestures.

"Wide Awake Will!" gasped the crowd; "he is injured."

But Luke Tuttle saw him and understood all. In a moment he was by Will's side.

"Great heavens, Will," he gasped. "What has happened?"

"Never mind me!" huskily replied the young fireman, "but—the—fire—there—put it out!"

Then he sank down in a heap in the snow. It was a thrilling moment.

When Wide Awake Will came to himself again he was in his own bed at home.

His mother, Mr. Needham and a family physician stood over him.

"I don't think fever will set in, madam," the doctor was saying. "It is a fortunate escape. Your son will be all right in a day or two."

"Oh, that is joyful news," cried Mrs. Wade, happily. "I don't think I will ever trust him out of my sight again."

"But he has made a hero of himself," said Mr. Needham, with enthusiasm; "how proud you should be of him!"

Will heard all this, and then suddenly raised himself upon his elbow.

"I'm all right!" he cried; "don't worry about me, mother. But did they put out that other fire?"

The astonished attendants turned, and Mrs. Wade threw her arms joyfully about Will's neck.

"Oh, heaven be praised, he has come back to himself!" she cried. "Will, my darling boy, you know me?"

"Of course I do, mother!" replied the young fireman, affectionately, "but did they put out that other fire?"

"They did, my boy," replied Mr. Needham, "though but for your timely warning it would have been a serious affair."

"That's all right, then," said Will, joyfully. "Now I must go down to the engine house at once."

He was about to spring up, but the physician forced him back, saying:

"Not yet, my boy. You must wait a little while. If you do not you will bring on brain fever, and then it will be weeks before you can go."

Will realized the truth of the doctor's words and obeyed. Yet he was quite impatient until Mr. Needham said:

"Grace has asked me very particularly about you, and with your permission will visit you some time to-day."

Will experienced a delicious sense of delight. Her sympathy and the knowledge that she really cared so much for him was most intoxicating.

Great excitement pervaded the town of Benton.

The details of Wide Awake Will's experience were in every newspaper. The people were intensely wrought up.

The young fireman's friends were legion, and that he should be treated so brutally fired the general wrath of the citizens.

Strong terms were used to characterize the cowardly incendiaries, and an indignation meeting was held in the public square.

In this Mayor Morse was severely censured for not taking more active and severe measures to bring the gang to justice.

"Mercy knows what I am to do," he said to Jeff that evening. "My political prospects are utterly ruined. I shall be defeated at the next election, and that is not far off."

The hopeful son laughed.

"All the more reason why you should help me to close that marriage contract with Grace Needham!" he declared. "I tell you they'll run Needham against you this fall and beat you, too!"

"Why, that's what I've been trying to do," said the mayor, testily.

"Oh, you've been trying, eh?" asked Jeff, eagerly.

"Why, yes."

"What luck?"

"Not very good."

Father and son looked at each other.

"What did you try?" asked Jeff.

"I tackled the young fireman. He literally abused me. He cannot be bought up."

Jeff Morse turned white.

"Thunder!" he yelled. "You didn't do that hare-brained thing? Why—the devil! I told you that you couldn't handle him. Of course he wouldn't be bribed. Ah, you have ruined the whole game now."

Jeff was the personification of fury and disgust. The mayor felt uncomfortable.

"I can't see why it was not the proper thing to do," he said.

"You can't? Well, then, you are dull. Don't you see you've thrown the game away? He'll tell her now. She will loathe me for a deep schemer, and——"

Jeff arose and paced the floor furiously. It was plain that he was very angry at his father, and the latter said, contritely:

"There, there; we'll fix it some other way Jeff. I am yet able to do it. You shall have the girl if I am able. I will move heaven and earth for you."

"There's only way now," said Jeff, moodily.

"What is that?"

"If we could only entice her away somewhere and shut her up we could bring her to terms. There is no time to lose. The first thing you know she will marry that young fireman."

"That is a risky move."

"But it can be done," said Jeff, earnestly.

A deadly light shone in Morse's eyes. He saw in this a sure chance to wreak a sure and sweet revenge upon Needham.

He was conscious of imbibing some of the inherent depravity of his son. Something in the atmosphere of his destiny seemed to impel him onward.

There was a time when politic work would have been his permanent resort. But his signal failures of late had shaken his confidence.

"You don't really think that could be safely done, Jeff?" he asked.

The son bent a keen gaze upon his father.

"Yes, I do."

"But you cannot do it alone?"

"No."

"Whom can you trust?"

"I have some good men, who are well under my thumb. They will do my bidding, and faithfully, too."

There was quite an interval of silence. Then the senior Morse rose and donned his overcoat.

"Go in and win, Jeff," he said; "but for the love of heaven be careful how you work, or we shall be ruined. I'll stand back of you as long as I can."

CHAPTER IX.

THE INCENDIARIES' DEN.

Jeff Morse lit a cigar and puffed it some time, thoughtfully, after his father's departure.

"The old man will stand back of me," he muttered; "he really has some regard for his dutiful son. Ha—ha—ha! but all the while he's feathering his own nest, for he knows he'll get back at his rival solid. Well, if I only get the peerless Grace and her millions I'll sing a gay song and laugh at Fate."

He smoked the cigar down to a stub, and then consulted his watch.

"Half after six," he muttered. "I'll go down to Weldon's to dinner, and then be in time to keep Joe's appointment."

He put on his overcoat and went down to the street.

It had been snowing, and there was a foot of it upon the sidewalks. But he trudged through it until he came to the lighted windows of a restaurant.

Darkness was rapidly shutting down as he entered the place.

He ordered a liberal fare, and then proceeded to leisurely discuss it.

But all the while his thoughts were upon other subjects, and he was in a most abstract frame of mind, so much so that he walked out of the place without paying his bill.

"He's all right, boss!" declared the waiter to the proprietor. "He's the mayor's son."

"I know that, you rascal!" growled Weldon. "Go back to your work."

Leaving the fashionable restaurant, Jeff went on hurriedly down the street. He turned a corner into a dark alley, and finally paused before a dingy door.

He rapped six times distinctly upon the door. Then he opened it and entered.

He was for a moment in darkness. But a door at the landing above opened and light streamed down into the hall.

"Come right up, pal," said a husky voice. "We've been waiting for ye."

Jeff went up the stairs and entered a square room, rudely furnished. An oil lamp burned upon a table; a coal fire glowed in a grate near.

Two men were in the chamber. One was Joe Sullivan, already familiar to the reader.

The other was a dark-browed ruffian, with a powerful jaw. His name was Mike Sheehy, and he was a desperate character.

Both ruffians greeted Jeff familiarly.

"Well, kid, how are ye?" gruffly said Mike Sheehy. "Hev a cheer by ther fire."

"Thanks," said Jeff, nonchalantly.

"Ye're right on tick."

"I'm always prompt. But where's Hank Hayden?"

"He's got a job out to-night," replied Joe Sullivan. "He'll be along a little later. It's another layout."

"Look here!" said Jeff, bluntly. "Aren't you fellows following it up close? How can you take such long chances?"

"We're most ready to skip!" replied Joe Sullivan. "We've worked the town. Last fire we got a good swag out of a safe breaking job in the East End. Nothing like a fire to give us fellows a chance."

And all laughed hideously.

These, then, were the villainous incendiaries who were working so much misery and ruin in the lovely little town of Benton.

And those were the boon comrades of Jeff Morse, the son of the mayor, who was fully cognizant of their murderous game.

Under cover of the fire they managed to burglarize and pilage, and rich was the plunder they secured.

One bank lost ten thousand dollars, several merchants had been robbed of large sums, and many private dwellings had been rifled. All this they had been enabled to do safely, while the incendiary fires claimed the attention of the distracted people.

"Yes, we've made good swag in this town," declared Sheehy. "I tell ye we'll leave here with a good pile."

"Look out you don't stay too long," said young Morse.

"Ugh! That would be bad."

"But before you go I've got a job for you."

The two ruffians looked interested.

"What is it?"

Jeff proceeded to tell them.

"You know the pretty daughter of the ex-mayor," he said.

"Grace Needham, I have made up my mind, shall belong to me. I want you to help me smuggle her into some safe retreat. You can do it better than I can. You shall be paid well."

The two villains exchanged glances and shrugged their shoulders.

"A girl scrape, eh?" growled Sheehy. "I don't like 'em! There's no luck in 'em."

"But you'll do it for me?" pleaded Jeff.

"Well," said Joe Sullivan, reluctantly. "We'll try and fix it up fer ye. But we're only here fer a week longer."

"The sooner the better for me," said Jeff.

But before more could be said a startling sound rang out upon the air. It brought all to their feet.

Clang—clang—clang!

"Fire!" gasped Jeff.

"Yes," replied Mike Sheehy, savagely; "there's no time to lose. Git your kit, Joe. We won't wait for Hank. Lively now."

The two cracksmen and incendiaries proceeded to gather up their burglar tools. Footsteps came hurriedly up the stairs.

A ruffianly man burst into the room. He was excited and out of breath.

"Hank!" exclaimed Sullivan. "Ye made it work, did ye?"

"By jinks, you bet!" cried the returned incendiary, "but I came within an ace of being nabbed. That confounded young fireman, Will Wade, is everywhere. Two policemen chased me almost here."

"Then it won't be safe to go out?" asked Sheehy, angrily.

"Oh, yes. Only go the other way. They've gone back to the fire!"

"Then let's be off."

No time was lost.

The villainous gang crept out into the night. Jeff left them, and started for the fire.

As he drew near the burning building he saw the members of No. 3 working like Trojans, and foremost among them was Wide Awake Will.

A high ladder was seen to mount upwards, and rest against the ledge of a window far above.

Up the ladder the young fireman went quickly, and the crowd cheered as he disappeared through a cloud of smoke.

In the street a woman was desperately wringing her hands and crying:

"Oh, save my child! Save my baby!"

It seemed that the distracted woman had lost her presence of mind, and fled from the burning building, leaving her child in its cradle.

The stairs had fallen, and she could not return for it. But Wide Awake Will gave her comfort.

"Fear not, my good woman, I will save your child if such a thing is possible," he cried.

And just as Jeff Morse arrived on the spot the young fireman disappeared through the smoking window. He was lost to sight and time elapsed.

It seemed an age and yet he did not reappear. The crowd were in great suspense. The excitement was fearful.

And now a terrible thing was witnessed. Flames burst from a lower window and began to lick the ladder. It would quickly consume it, and Will would be left to the mercy of the flames unless he appeared at once.

The crowd yelled madly. And at that moment, as if in response, the young fireman appeared.

A mighty cheer went up. In his arms he held the infant. Then a great cry went up.

"Hurry, Will, the ladder is weakening."

But before Will could obey, the flame consumed ladder fell. Down into the snow it went. Flames leaped from the window at Will's back and enveloped him.

There was but one chance, one dreadful hope. To remain was death. The young fireman waited not a moment, but with the child upheld in his arms leaped. Down he went, feet foremost, to the snow-covered sidewalk, seemingly to certain death.

CHAPTER X.

FIGHTING FLAME AND SMOKE.

It seemed as if Wide Awake Will and his precious charge had certainly gone down to death when the fearful leap from the flaming window was made.

Every person in the crowd held his or her breath, and nerves were rigid, and lips white with horror.

But it might have been the depth of snow that saved both. The young fireman fell deeply into it and rolled, still, however, holding the child, unharmed, in his arms.

There he lay, half insensible from the shock. But eager, willing hearts were on hand to care for the young hero.

The child was quickly given over to its mother, and an overjoyed woman she was.

Luke Tuttle took Will up in his strong arms and carried him out of the circle of danger.

A few drops of brandy revived the young fireman, and when it was seen that he was uninjured and certain to recover, the crowd cheered wildly.

But Will would not yield to persuasions to leave the spot. The fire was spreading, and he was determined to return to his post of duty.

So shaking off restraining hands, he rushed again into the thickest of the fight. Soon he was at the front line.

But there was one person in the crowd who regarded Will's heroic act with envious eyes and a deep and bitter sense of hatred.

This was Jeff Morse.

"Curse the young pauper!" hissed Jeff between set teeth. "Why couldn't he have broken his neck then? If I could only get the chance I'd see to it that he would not stand in my path much longer.

"But for him I am sure that Grace Needham would have regarded my suit with favor. His influence over her is most powerful.

"But he shall never win her from me. If the trio, Sullivan, Sheehy and Hayden don't go back on me, I shall soon hold the winning card."

Thus he soliloquized, and the expression upon his face was a hard and bitter one. There was a positively murderous feeling uppermost in his heart against Wide Awake Will.

All unconscious of this, the young fireman was doing his best to subdue the flames.

But they had again got beyond the control of the fireman, and a large mercantile block next to the burning building was seriously threatened.

Now the east wall of the burning building fell in. Several fireman narrowly escaped being buried.

This sent up a mighty torrent of flames, and it caught the roof of the mercantile block. Instantly the fire spread.

It was a most disheartening sight, and groans rent the air as the agonized spectators realized their utter inability to prevent the ruin.

All depended upon the fire ladders now.

If this block should go, it was likely that the conflagration would sweep that part of the town clean, for the wind was coming up powerful strong.

"By jinks, Will!" exclaimed Luke Tuttle, as they were carrying a line of hose to the next corner. "It looks bad, don't it?"

Will's face was pale but resolute.

"Yes!" he agreed, "it does. But we must not let it go further."

"It will sweep this part of the city!"

"It must not!"

Streams of water were thrown up to the roof of the endangered building. But in spite of this the flames spread.

They had now gained the upper story of the building.

The merchants who occupied the structure were nearly crazy.

One of them—a Jew money-lender, who occupied the top story—was frantic.

"Mein Gott! dot is awful!" he cried wildly. "My papers vill all be burned, and zere is everyting I haf in de world up dere. Oh, I shall go crazy."

So piteous were his cries that Wide Awake Will's attention was at once attracted.

"Keep your courage!" he said coolly; "perhaps I can help you to get your valuables. Tell me where they are."

"Yakoob an' Rachel!" cried the excited Hebrew. "You vill find dem in a small black trunk in von corner of de room. Just throw it out of der vinder an' you vill safe me all I haf in de world."

"I'll try it!" said Will.

By his orders a ladder was run up to a third story window. Up this he lightly went.

Arrived at the top round, he quickly broke open a window and sprang through it.

Will had a double purpose in entering the burning building. He would, of course, endeavor to save the valuable papers of the Jew, but he was anxious to learn the exact situation of the fire center, and how it could be best handled.

Into the room beyond he went. It was a lawyer's office, but now thick with suffocating smoke.

Will pushed his way through it as best he could, and gained the corridor beyond. Along this he went until he came to stairs leading to the upper floor.

Smoke was dense, but the flames had not yet reached this part of the building.

He pulled off his jacket and wound it about his face. Then he crouched low and felt his way along toward the eastern wall of the building.

Now he felt the heat of the fire just ahead. He knew that it was spreading toward the north part of the building and that he could go no further.

Neither would it do for him to tarry long in this part of the building; at any moment the fire might cut off his retreat and he would be lost.

He was satisfied that the best point from which to attack the flames would be from the north side of the building.

This conclusion reached, he was, of course, anxious to return at once to the ground below; but he now bethought himself of his promise to the Jew.

He turned to the right and entered the Hebrew's rooms. He groped about in the smoke, and was fortunate enough to find the hair-covered trunk.

It was but a few moments' work to drag it to the window. Without looking out Will dumped it over the sill.

He knew the owner would be looking for it below.

Now, to leave the building. He realized that there was but little time left.

The flames were gaining fearful headway. Even as he

reached the corridor he was momentarily driven back by the fire.

But he made a dash through it, and rushing ahead into the smoke, suddenly stumbled and fell.

He was nigh suffocated, but along the floor of the corridor there was a draught of air which revived him.

He inhaled it with the greatest of relish for some moments.

Then he arose and staggered on.

But now a horrifying sound reached his ears. It was a dull sullen crash. It came from the direction of the stairs.

"My God!" gasped the young fireman, "the stairs have fallen."

He dashed forward to make sure whether this was really the truth or not. It did not take him long to discover that it was too true.

The stairs had fallen.

His retreat seemed certainly cut off. What was to be done? For a moment he was literally overcome with horror.

"Heaven help me!" he gasped. "I am surrounded by fire. I must die."

But a sudden desperate thought came to him. Next to this building was another. As both were owned by the same man, there had never been anything but a wooden partition between.

He made his way quickly to the end of the corridor.

The partition was before him. There was no time to lose, as the smoke was getting so dense that he must soon suffocate.

Unloosening the ax at his belt, he swung it aloft, and began making rapid blows at the partition. It trembled beneath those blows.

CHAPTER XI.

A DASTARDLY ATTACK.

With all his strength Wide Awake Will battered away at the partition. Now the boards began to yield.

They finally flew away in splinters, and the laths and plastering upon the other side were revealed.

Will soon enlarged the opening, when a burst of flame superseded the smoke and all about him became plain as day.

Beyond he saw a square room which seemed to be some sort of an office. A door was visible, and the young fireman saw an avenue of escape.

He now worked with redoubled effort, but just as it seemed that he had made an opening large enough to crawl through a peculiar thing happened.

A package of papers fell down through the interior of the partition.

Will was just able to distinguish this, and gave a start of surprise.

"That's queer," he muttered. "It looks as if they were hidden there. What can they be?"

He picked up the bundle. They looked like old documents, and were bound with a slip of leather.

However, there was no time to inspect them just then.

Will had no means of knowing whether they were of any value or not. He thrust the package into an inner pocket, and then again began work upon the partition.

He now speedily made his way into the next building.

A window was near, and reaching it he leaned far over the sill. He was seen by those below.

A cheer went up, for this was the first seen of the young fireman since he had entered the building, and many feared that he had come to harm.

Will picked up his speaking trumpet and shouted some orders to the boys of No. 3.

"Put a ladder up the north side of the building!" he shout-

ed. "Run up a line of hose to the third window. I'll meet you there!"

Then Will turned back into the building. He went to a rear window and saw the fire laddies put up a ladder.

Then as they carried up the line of hose Will turned to go back into the burning building.

It was a hazardous thing to do, but he did not falter. Wrapping his coat again about his face, he plunged into the smoke.

Soon he had reached the window at which the firemen were to appear. They were struggling up the ladder with the hose.

Will reached down and assisted them to the sill.

Then the young fireman steadied the nozzle, and carrying it to the corridor turned on the water.

The effect was at once apparent.

The smoke increased, but now a draught from the aperture in the partition drove it the other way.

The flames were beaten back by the volume of water, and the fire was soon under control.

But for hours the fight continued, and not until the last ember had expired did the fire boys desist.

It was then near morning, and weary and exhausted, they dragged themselves home.

When Will reached home he went at once to bed. He slept for some hours, and it was near noon when he awoke.

Then he arose and ate a hearty meal. He forgot all about the packet of papers in his pocket. Mrs. Wade said:

"Will, Mr. Needham is coming here at two o'clock to see us upon important business."

Will looked surprised.

"What is it, mother?"

There was a hopeful light in Mrs. Wade's eyes as she replied:

"He is very sanguine that he can get at least a settlement from Morse in regard to the Eureka Mine. It is very kind of him to take such a deep interest in our affairs."

"Very kind, indeed," said Will. "I hope I shall be able to repay him some time."

"Only think, my boy! If we can only get the Eureka back again there will be a chance for you to rise in the world."

Wide Awake Will experienced a pleasant sensation. Surely it was gratifying to reflect upon such a possibility.

He thought of beautiful Grace Needham, and his bosom swelled. Perhaps she would then think of him in a way which he hardly dared hope for now.

"Well, mother," said Will, "I must go down to the engine house first. I will return here in an hour."

Will put on his overcoat and went out. The walk to the engine house was a brisk one and he felt better for it.

Some of the boys were there, and there was a subject of discussion on hand, which Will at once saw was acrimonious. He was not a little surprised.

"What is the matter, boys?" he asked, as he entered the engine house.

"Here he is," cried Luke Tuttle. "Will Wade, we are all of us as mad as hornets."

"Mad!" exclaimed Will, in surprise. "What about?"

"Read that and you will understand!"

Luke handed the young fireman the morning newspaper. Will saw the heading of an article on the first page.

Thus it read:

"Last Night's Fire—A heavy loss. No doubt the work of incendiaries. The incompetency of our fire department, with a beardless boy for a chief. Need of a capable man of brains and experience to direct the work of fighting the flames."

Then followed a long and exhaustive dissertation upon the folly of allowing Wide Awake Will to direct the work of the fire department.

It was a bitter and venomous attack upon the boy chief, and Will was "kuocked all in a heap," so to speak, by it. He read it line for line.

For a moment a mist came before his eyes. His heart swelled as if it would burst.

The manifest untruthfulness and injustice of the attack was what wounded him. He dropped the paper and sank down upon a bench.

Then everyone of the fire boys began to express their opinion, and in a forcible manner, too.

"It's a lie!"

"It's a dirty piece of work!"

"They ought to hang the scoundrel who wrote it!"

But Will staggered to his feet and put up a hand deprecatingly.

"Wait a moment, boys!" he said. "I want to ask one question. Do you think that is the sentiment of the people of this town?"

"No, no!" vociferated all.

But Will shook his head.

"I'm afraid it is," he said. "God knows I've tried to do my duty. I feel that it is my duty, however, to resign, and let them put in a more competent man. This is my last day on No. 3."

With a swelling sense of emotion which he could not contain Will started to leave the engine house. He was deeply wounded.

But Luke Tuttle threw an arm about him.

"Will Wade, ye shall never do that!" cried the assistant foreman, hotly; "the moment you leave No. 3 it will be disbanded. We will not stay, and the town may burn up for all of us."

But Will only wrung the other's hand with intense earnestness.

"I appreciate your kindly sentiments," he said, "but there is no other or better course for me. It is for the best."

Will turned to leave.

But at that moment, a tall, distinguished form appeared in the doorway.

It was Mr. Needham.

In his hand he held a copy of the newspaper, and his eyes were blazing. He confronted Will.

"Where are you going, my boy?" he asked with intensity.

"I am going home!" said Will, in a husky voice. "Good-by, sir. Good-by, everybody!"

Will attempted to pass the ex-mayor. But the latter took him by the shoulders and forced him down upon the bench.

"Sit there!" he said. "I mean to explain to you finally the cause of this miserable outrage, which I can assure you the honest people of this town do not indorse."

CHAPTER XII.

RECOVERED FROM THE FLAMES.

With an effort Will became calm and said:

"Mr. Needham, I appreciate your friendly attitude towards me. I know that you believe in me. But if there were not people in this town who have those bitter feelings toward me they would not have allowed the daily newspapers to attack me in that manner."

"My boy," said the ex-mayor, somewhat sternly. "You are not a coward. You must remember the battle of life is only best fought by those who maintain their position against all attacks. There is a deep and miserable purpose under all this. It is a trick to deprive the town of your services at a time when they are most needed. Don't let it succeed!"

The mayor's argument was telling.

"The editor of that paper is one of my friends!" said Will, quietly. "And yet he published that attack upon me. If it had not his sanction would he have done it?"

"Wait!" said Mr. Needham, turning a page in the paper. "You have not read all. See what the editorial column says."

Will glanced at the editorial mechanically. To his surprise he read:

"The readers of the Star will find upon the front page an article reflecting upon the honor and capabilities of our brave boy fireman, Wide Awake Will Wade. The editor wishes to state authoritatively that he considers it an unjust attack, that it has not his indorsement, or that of any other reputable citizen of Benton, and also that it is not published as a voluntary contribution, but as a paid advertisement which cannot by law be refused."

"What do you think of that?" asked Ex-Mayor Needham, triumphantly.

A new light broke upon Will's mind. He instantly recovered.

"Who wrote the article?" he asked. "It will hurt the writer more than it will me."

"Right," cried Mr. Needham. "I found out who wrote it from the editor. It was that young scamp, Jeff Morse."

"Jeff Morse!" exclaimed Will, with a breath of relief. "Ah, well, I don't care for his opinion. I'm all right again."

"Hurrah!" cried the fire boys. "Of course you are, Will. Don't pay any attention to him."

"There's just one thing about it," said Luke Tuttle, vengefully. "The next time I see that young scoundrel I'll make him eat those words, by Jupiter."

Will was in a happy frame of mind once more. He knew that the article, far from injuring him, would only increase his popularity.

"But come, Will," said Mr. Needham. "I'm going up to your house. I have a lawyer with me, who is to take up the Eureka case. We will have a discussion and enter suit against Morse at once."

"Oh, Mr. Needham," said Will, with fullness of heart, "how am I ever going to pay you back?"

"You have done that already," cried Mr. Needham. "But come!"

Mr. Needham led the way out to the street, where his carriage was waiting.

A gentleman of scholarly appearance sat within it.

"Lawyer Williams, this is Will Wade," said the ex-mayor in introduction.

The three conversed pleasantly until the Wade residence was reached.

Will found Lawyer Williams an exceedingly pleasant and affable man. Quite a friendship sprang up between them.

"Mr. Needham has told me something of your case, my boy," he said, "and if it's possible I shall gain a victory for you."

"You are very kind," said Will, warmly.

Mrs. Wade met them at the door with something of her old time stateliness when she was mistress of the finest house in Benton.

They entered the little sitting room, and soon were engaged in the most pleasant of conversation.

But ere long the subject of the interview was brought up.

It was freely disclosed, Mrs. Wade giving her story to Mr. Williams.

The lawyer listened intently.

"You are quite sure that your husband never disposed of the deed to the Eureka Gold Mine?"

"I am quite sure of it," she replied.

"Then this deed held by Morse——"

"Is no doubt forged!" said Mr. Needham, emphatically.

"Well," said Mr. Williams, thoughtfully, "of course we are proceeding upon rather slim evidence of fraud. We perhaps can make him prove the validity of his deed——"

"Which he can never do without perjury," said the ex-mayor.

"Very true. But will not a man who is bad enough to commit forgery also perjure himself?"

Mr. Needham realized the force and logic of this argument.

"However," said the lawyer, quickly, "I will try and worry some sort of a committal out of him. We may succeed in getting him to cut his fingers. It is a pity the original deed could not be found. Have you carefully searched all papers?"

"I have searched everywhere," said Mrs. Wade, "and I regret to say that I cannot find a trace of it."

"That is unfortunate."

These words recalled an incident to Will's mind. He instantly placed his hand in his coat pocket.

"Speaking of lost papers," he exclaimed, "makes me think that I found some documents last night in the fire."

"Found them in the fire?" asked Mr. Needham, in surprise.

"Yes; they fell down between the partition of the two buildings. Here they are."

And Will laid the package upon the table.

"Documents?" exclaimed Mr. Needham. "Why, that makes me think that the room beyond that partition was once your father's office, Will."

"My father's office?"

Will spoke with startling force.

"Yes!"

"You don't suppose that these papers then were once his?"

"It may be so."

With trembling, eager hands Mr. Needham picked them up. As he did so he saw printed upon the Morocco leather band in gilt letters:

"OFFICE OF JAMES WADE."

"They are your father's papers, Will!" cried the ex-mayor, excitedly. "I am not sure, but——"

He did not finish the sentence. He turned over the Morocco band and then scattered the papers.

They consisted of drawings, surveys, and a deed which read:

"Deed to Eureka Gold Mine."

The papers lay outspread before all. It was like a strange, unreal dream.

The scene was a tableau for an artist. Not one spoke, but sat gazing in a dazed manner at the papers.

Will felt a strange tightness across the temples. He could not believe his senses. But he was the first one to recover and to say, fulsomely:

"It is the work of a merciful God! His blessing is upon us!"

CHAPTER XIII.

AT MR. NEEDHAM'S.

Indeed it seemed truly the work of a Divine Power that Will Wade's rights should have been restored to him so wonderfully and in such a manner.

Through the flames the great proof of his rightful ownership, of the Eureka Mine had come.

But for his bravery in invading the burning building and in cutting his way through the partition he would never have come across this evidence.

Lawyer Williams arose and said:

"My boy, that was a truthful utterance. It is the hand of

God. We have the case now in our hands. Let me congratulate you."

The great flood of happiness which seemed to have descended all at once upon Will Wade and his mother was most intense. For some time they could not speak.

Then Mr. Needham said:

"The right will always prevail. I am overwhelmed by this piece of good fortune."

"Indeed!" said Will, excitedly, "I am unable to express myself. It is so unexpected!"

Mrs. Wade was quietly weeping. She now clasped Will in her arms, crying brokenly:

"I knew God would not desert us. It is your right, my boy, and you have now the means to establish your career."

"My one aim in life shall be to make your declining days happy, my dear mother," cried Will, fulsomely.

"Lawyer Williams arose.

"There is no need of prolonging this discussion," he said. "I will at once enter a claim and suit against Morse. He will have to prove that he has not been holding Eureka fraudulently all this while or go to prison. At any rate, he will have to make a strict accounting of the profits of the mine, for at no time has it been lawfully his property."

"Lawyer Williams," said Mr. Needham, earnestly, "I trust you will do your best in the interests of justice. Remember that you may hold me responsible for all matters of expense."

"No!" cried Will, "you are very kind, Mr. Needham, but we will be able to pay Mr. Williams for his services in full."

"That matter need cost you no worriment at all," said the lawyer with a laugh. "I don't care if I never get any pay. I am interested and am going to see this thing through."

With this Mr. Williams took his leave. Mr. Needham went out to the coach with him and said to the driver:

"John, take this gentleman where he pleases. Then return here for me."

"All right, sir," replied the coachman.

Then Mr. Needham went back into the house. Mrs. Wade met him with streaming eyes.

"Oh, Carter!" she said, in a hysterical way, "is it really true? Are we to have our rights at last? It seems all like a dream."

"It is indeed true," said Mr. Needham, in an elated tone. "I tell you Alden Morse has been a very wicked man, and such cannot prosper."

"What will Jeff say now?" cried Will. "I can imagine how furious he will be."

"Well, we will not think more upon the subject now," said Mr. Needham. "Mr. Williams is a man to be trusted, and I feel sure that he will bring all out safely."

"I have no doubt of it."

"Now I have a proposition to make which you will please me by accepting."

Will and his mother looked inquisitive.

"I want you to go up to my house with me, or at least the house I now occupy since mine was burned. My carriage will return very shortly, and Grace will be anxious to hear the good news. We can discuss it fully, and you shall dine and sup with us, and I will bring you home again in the evening."

"Really, Carter," began Mrs. Wade.

But Mr. Needham put up his hand.

"No excuses, nor no refusal," he said. "It is all settled."

"But they may want me at the engine house," said Will.

"If they do they have only to telephone to my house. I will send word there at once. If there is a fire the alarm will notify you."

"Of course we shall be honored," said Will, with swelling heart, as he thought of the delightful opportunity to meet Grace. Somehow the horizon had grown unusually rosy.

"Blow the honor!" cried the ex-mayor, bluffly. "It is I who am honored."

There was no refusing the invitation. In a short time the carriage came back.

Will and his mother were all ready, and they entered the carriage. The air was still frosty, and there were a few snow-flakes flying about.

In due time they reached the house, which was Ex-Mayor Needham's residence until his own residence should be rebuilt.

They entered the drawing room, and Grace came in to greet them delightedly.

"Oh, father!" she cried, "it was so good of you to bring them here," and she gave Will a smile which sent his blood tingling.

It was a pleasant afternoon, which passed so quickly by that all were surprised when the dinner was announced.

Grace was more than delighted at Will's good fortune, but at a favorable moment she went up to him, and with shining eyes, said:

"Will, do you remember our talk at the ball?"

"What?" he said.

"You said you were fighting the flames for fame and fortune."

"Yes."

"And also that in them you expected to win your fortune. You have won fame, as well as fortune, and you have reason to be proud as well as happy."

"You are right," said Will, happily. "But there is one thing which would make me happier than all else."

"What is that?"

"Your good opinion."

Grace laughed coyly, and shot a glance at Will which dazzled him.

"You always had that," she replied.

The ordinary lover would have committed himself there and then and learned his fate; but Will did not. A natural reticence caused him to shrink, though his nature was sufficiently ardent.

"Not yet!" he reflected. "I must give her further proof of my worthiness."

Foolish boy. This he could never do. Yet it did not matter, for there was an instinctive bond between the two which needed not an ardent declaration to cement forever.

Later in the evening Will and his mother left the Needham residence. They were soon at home once more.

Mrs. Wade was very happy. Upon entering her house she turned to Will with burning eyes and said:

"Will, do you really care for Grace Needham?"

This nearly took the young fireman's breath away. He blushed as red as a peony.

"Why—I—yes, I like her very much."

"That is not enough. Do you really love her?"

The unerring perception of the mother read the truth in her boy's face. She laughed and said, teasingly:

"What a courageous boy you are. Can't you see that she literally worships you? Now if you don't care for her, I want your acquaintance to end here. For Grace is a noble girl and I will not allow you to trifle with her!"

Will gave his mother a reproachful glance.

"Mother," he exclaimed, "how can you think that of me? I will tell you the truth; I love Grace with all my soul, but——"

"What!" Mrs. Wade looked keenly at him.

"She is an angel on earth. And I—I am a rough fireman. If I were worthy——"

"Nonsense!" cried Mrs. Wade, impetuously. "Get rid of that foolish idea of equality. You are in every way her equal. You will make us all happy if you will tell Grace the truth. Now that we are to be wealthy once more, we need be looked down upon by nobody. She will make you happy."

"Mother," said Will, earnestly, "I will do as you say, and as long as life lasts I will consecrate every effort to make her happy."

"In that," said Mrs. Wade, "you will make me very happy. I want to see you united."

Will Wade was very happy indeed when he retired that night to sleep the sleep of the righteous.

Truly the young fireman's future was growing brighter, but in spite of this, dark clouds were yet to mar it.

There were exciting episodes close at hand, and dark and deadly machinations yet threatened to destroy his life happiness, and bring ruin upon him.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TRIAL SUMMONS.

Several days passed. The Morses, especially the senior, were all unsuspecting the cyclone which was shortly to break about their heads.

But in a small town or city it is almost impossible to prevent an inkling of any large enterprise leaking out.

So it was in Benton.

For several days before the crisis came there was a mysterious portent in the air. Somebody told somebody else that something was going to happen.

And this something was inferred to concern all the prominent people in the town, or at least the most of them.

But it was generally fancied to be altogether different from what it really was. The newspapers and gossips believed it a social scandal.

One day Jeff Morse came into his father's office and said:

"Look here, dad. What's all this talk in the air round town? It seems as if mystery was everywhere."

The elder Morse looked surprised.

"I don't understand you, my son!" he said. "Make your meaning clearer!"

"Well, I don't know as I can," growled Jeff. "Only there's something in the air. I saw that young upstart of a fireman yesterday, and he was in as high feather as a lark. You don't suppose——"

Jeff paused.

"Well?" asked the senior Morse.

"You don't suppose that he is putting up any job on us, do you? I think he'd like to get square with me for that article I put in the paper about him."

The senior Morse cleared his throat.

"That was a very indiscreet act upon your part, Jeff," he said.

"I don't care!" said Jeff, angrily. "I wanted to get back on him some way."

"But that was a boomerang!"

"Oh, you sympathize with the young puppy, do you?" flashed Jeff.

"No, I don't," replied the elder Morse, "but I certainly don't admire your good sense. That is all. As for the young scamp putting up a job on us, it is nonsense. What could he do?"

"He might bring a libel suit against me. Or——"

"What?"

"I've seen that Lawyer Williams around with old Needham a good deal lately. You know when you quit partnership with Wade, the widow always claimed that the Eureka belonged to her."

Morse turned clear around in his chair and faced his son.

His face was chalky white, and there was a ringing snap in his voice as he said:

"Have you heard anything of that kind lately?"

"N-no; I only surmised that. You have never told me just how that matter with Wade was. Is the title to Eureka clear?"

"Clear!" gasped the senior Morse. "Of course it is. How

could it be otherwise? If anybody ever asks you that question tell them so emphatically."

"All right," said Jeff, with an air of relief. "It would be a hard one on us if we were to lose Eureka, wouldn't it, dad?"

"Well, I haven't any idea of giving it up just yet," replied the mayor. "I don't think they can attack the title."

Jeff came nearer and looked his father full in the face:

"Dad," he said, resolutely, "you and I have got to work together. Now let me give you a hint. Don't you take any chances. See that the title is made good and strong right away."

They looked steadily at each other for some moments. Then Morse said:

"Jeff, you have a good head. I believe you will succeed. I will take your advice. Leave the rest to me."

"All right."

Jeff had started for the door when it opened. A stern voice said:

"Is Mr. Alden Morse here?"

"Yes," replied the mayor. "What is it?"

A short, square shouldered man entered. He bowed most profoundly.

He was dressed in blue cloth with plain brass buttons. He wore a slouch hat and a badge under his lapel.

"Sheriff Stearns!" exclaimed Morse. "Come in. What will you have?"

"I am very sorry to be compelled to state the nature of my errand," said the sheriff politely, "but I am obliged to notify you of a summons to court next week. The suit is entered by Lawyer Williams, and is brought by Carter Needham et al."

Jeff Morse dropped a startled exclamation. His father looked astounded.

"A suit brought against me by Carter Needham!" he gasped. "What does it mean?"

"It is to compel you to prove the validity of a certain deed which you hold, and which entails the ownership of Eureka Mine!"

Jeff Morse turned to his father with a sharp, quick exclamation.

"I told you so!" he cried. "It has come."

"There is also another summons!" said the sheriff; "this is brought by the heirs direct of James Wade, namely, William Wade and Mary Wade, to recover the Eureka Gold Mine and all the profits of said mine for a certain number of years past."

Had a bomb exploded in the place Alden Morse could not have received a greater shock. For a few moments he was speechless.

At first there was a hunted light in his eyes, an expression of deadly terror. Then he forced a harsh laugh.

"Well, well!" he said, in a grating voice. "You have your hands full of business, Stearns. Those people have considerable audacity to bring open suit against the mayor of this city. They want law, do they? Well, by heaven, they shall have it. I will file an answer to these suits at once. That is all, Stearns."

The sheriff bowed and withdrew.

Alden Morse then turned to his hopeful son and his face was as black as midnight.

"Jeff, the crisis has come. We must fight together. They are going to try and ruin us. But, curse them! they will never do it!"

"How dare they bring suit without justifiable evidence?"

"The evidence they have not got. They think that they can bring it out at the trial. They are going to make me prove the validity of my claim upon Eureka, eh?"

"What is your claim?"

"A deed, signed by James Wade, witnessed and recorded."

"But—was he the original owner? Was the deed he had of the mine recorded?"

"I think not. He had a deed, but shortly before he died it disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Yes."

Jeff did not lose the significance in his father's voice.

"How did that happen?"

Morse drew nearer to his son and said:

"I have never told you for politic reasons, my son. Nobody knows it but myself. But you remember when the old Jerome building was burned the other day?"

"One end of it was burned."

"Yes, but in that end Wade and I had our office. He was almost on his last legs. The deed was in his desk. The day he died I saw that it was put where it would be safe."

"Ah," whispered Jeff. "Then you have the deed in your possession?"

"No, it is burned up."

"Burned up?"

"Yes; when that building went up in smoke the other day the deed went with it. It was between the walls of that structure where I hid it. I had meant to reclaim it, so as to get the exact description of the land from it, but the flames forestalled me."

"Ah! and this deed you have—it was not really signed by Wade?"

"His name is on it," was the evasive reply.

"Ah, I see the risk. If the forgery could be proved it would be bad for you, father. But it never will."

Jeff Morse gripped his father's hand.

"We understand each other now, dad, thoroughly," he declared. "And we can make a good team. They will never beat us, for we will pull together to the end."

"They can only beat us by producing the original deed which is really in Mrs. Wade's name," hissed Morse. "You see Wade had no right to deed the mine without his wife's signature, and my deed is instantly proved a forgery the moment that is produced."

"It will never be produced."

"Never!"

CHAPTER XV.

A STRAIGHT SHOT.

The serving of the summons upon the mayor and the notice of the trial caused a sensation in Benton.

People began to regard the Morses, father and son, with suspicion.

"Nice man to be mayor of the city!" said one man. "He ought to be rode on a rail! He is a disgrace to the community."

Others regarded it as a scurrilous attack upon the mayor.

"It is all a political game," said another. "Carter Needham wants to get the mayoralty back again. It will all come out at election."

Thus a genuine sensation existed in political, financial and social circles in Benton, such as it had never had before.

But the friends of the Wades were joyful and hopeful.

"There is no doubt but that the old skinflint, Alden Morse, jewed the widow out of her rights," was their version. "She ought to have them."

And thus the sensation grew hourly.

Of course Wide Awake Will and his friends were confident, for they had the positive knowledge that the case was in their hands.

Jeff Morse made a good deal of blustering talk about town.

"After the trial I think the Wades better get out of town."

he declared; "they will be unpopular, for all their bunco game didn't work."

One day a man in a Scotch tweed suit and red side-whiskers, and smelling badly of poor liquor, stopped Jeff on the street.

"Hello, covey!" he said. "I want to see you!"

"Joe Sullivan!" gasped Jeff, as he recognized the leader of the incendiaries.

"That's me!" said the fellow, hoarsely; "don't give my make-up away."

"You're in disguise?"

"Don't you see I am, you calf?"

"Where have you been the past week?"

"Down to New York. It got hot around here, and after that last burn we had to steer clear for awhile."

"Where are the others?"

"Mike and his nibbs? Oh, down here in a back street dive. They're laying low for to-night."

"To-night?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"What for? Pooty question to ask. We've a big job on fer to-night. We're going to pull your biggest bank for fifty thousand. Mike thinks he's got one of the combinations. To cover us you'll see the big hotel here go up in smoke."

"What! The Grand Hotel?"

"Yes, in course."

Jeff was dazed by this announcement. But he professed to admire the villain's pluck and with an oath said:

"When are you going to do that job for me?"

"How'll next week do?"

That was the week of the trial. It seemed like a good opportunity. So Jeff replied:

"Next week will do. You'll get the girl into a good safe place!"

"You bet, and then we're off for another clime. So long, old hoss!"

Sullivan was gone the next moment. Jeff walked away in a startled state of mind.

For the first time in his life he realized fully what desperate characters he was doing business with.

He shivered.

"Umph! I'm glad I'm on the right side of them," he muttered. "I'd rather have the fiends on my track than one of them."

"Yes, they'll do that abduction job for me in good shape, and it's the only way I'll ever win Grace Needham. Once I get her in my power—oh, I'll tame her."

With this he turned into a billiard parlor and squandered the rest of the day, engaged in driving the ivory balls into pockets with a boon companion.

The Grand Hotel was the pride of Benton.

In all the great country about there was no structure to rival it. The building was a costly one.

That evening among the arrivals there were three men, whose appearance did not excite undue attention.

One was evidently a drummer, for he inquired about the sample room. He was given a room on the third floor.

The next was a farmer, who was relegated to the fifth story. The third was a merchant apparently, who was domiciled upon the first floor front.

At twelve o'clock the big hotel was dark, and its hundreds of inmates were apparently in the land of slumber.

It happened that Wide Awake Will had remained up late that night writing letters. His room looked out over the city, and at midnight he put aside his pen to retire to rest.

But as he did so he went to the window and looked out.

The Grand Hotel was in the main street beyond, but so great was its height that its upper windows were visible above the roof of the building across the street from Will's house.

So that the young fireman could look across the housetops

and into any room of the top story of the Grand, provided there was a light there and the shutters were open.

He looked across there now and beheld a thrilling sight.

The shutters of a room in the upper corner of the house were open. In the middle of the room was piled a heap of refuse.

Will saw a man in the act of lighting it with a match.

For a moment the young fireman was horror struck. Then a terrible realization came to him that he was a witness of the incendiary's work and that the Grand Hotel was about to go up in smoke.

"My God!" he shrieked, "the villain! the wretch! Kill him!"

Then an idea occurred to him. He sprang to a table near and picked up a revolver lying there.

Will Wade had no desire to take human life. But he knew that the fiend before him was worse than a murderer.

He would have been justified in killing him.

But he took aim carefully and quickly and whispered:

"Heaven pray that I may not kill him. But something must be done. This incendiary work must stop. It is my duty."

Then he pulled the trigger.

Crack!

The pistol shot went true to the mark. It crashed through the glass of the distant hotel window.

The incendiary threw up his arms and fell just as he was about to light the pile of inflammable stuff.

Then Will Wade dashed down and out of the house. At the same moment the clangor of bells went up and the cry went out upon the night air.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

CHAPTER XVI.

WILL IN PERIL.

Wide Awake Will had but one idea in view as he rushed down the street toward the Grand Hotel.

He had the desire to reach the upper story of the hotel and capture the incendiary whom he had shot, dead or alive.

The bells were ringing madly. Flames were bursting from other parts of the hotel. People were gathering rapidly from all quarters.

It was a terrible report which had gone forth that the big hotel was burning. As the cry went through the streets with thrilling intonation everybody left their beds and hurriedly repaired to the scene.

No. 3 had already left the engine house for the first time without its young chief.

Luke Tuttle had waited a brief minute for Wide Awake Will. Then he cried:

"Something is keeping him or he would be here. Never mind, boys. Give way with a will and we'll get there!"

The command was obeyed. No. 3 was the first on hand.

Instantly a line of hose was run into the hotel. The hook and ladder truck came and the ladders were quickly brought into play.

And this was none too soon.

The flames were spreading like mad. The terrified guests, roused so summarily from their slumbers, rushed hither and thither in wild confusion.

There was much danger of a possible loss of life in the excitement. Luke Tuttle saw this and also that the flames were in full force, and thought of Will.

"By gracious, Will Wade ought to be here now!" he muttered; "there is work for him, and such as only he can do."

Will Wade was there.

But he was at that moment inside the burning structure, though no one knew it.

He had reached the hotel before the fire companies, and at once dashed blindly through smoke up the stairs.

Up, up he went; until the third landing was reached. He had in his mind the location of the room in which was the incendiary.

Down a long passage he sped. People, some cursing and some praying, in terror rushed past him.

But Will kept on until he reached what he believed was the door of the room in which he had seen the incendiary.

It was locked.

But he put his weight against it and it crashed in. He bounded into the room. The gas jet yet burned brightly.

And Will saw that he had come with unerring precision to just the right place. It was the very room, and there upon the floor lay the quivering form of a man.

There was the pile of combustibles. They had been lit, but the brief blaze had smoldered and gone out. This was fortunate.

Will stooped over the prostrate man, and an exclamation of joy escaped his lips as he saw that he was alive.

He was not a murderer; the shot had not proved fatal. This was a great relief to the young fireman.

He saw that the ball had glanced along the villain's skull. It was a severe concussion which rendered him half unconscious and helpless.

Will knew that it was very important that this man's life should be saved. He took a keen look at him.

He was a rough-looking fellow, with a hardened cast of features. It was Hank Hayden, though Will did not know his name.

"From him, perhaps, we can learn the identity of the others!" the young fireman muttered, "then we would soon put an end to the reign of terror which has convulsed Benton for so long."

Without further hesitation Will picked the fellow up in his arms as if he had been a child.

He carried him to the door and out into the passage. He remembered that the stairway at the east end of the house had been in flames when he came up.

So he reckoned it safer to take the other means of exit. He ran as fast as possible down the passage.

It was remarkable how quickly the flames had made headway.

The work of the incendiaries had been swift and sure. Fired in so many different parts of the building, it was impossible to extinguish the flames.

But fortunately most of the guests had managed to escape. At least all on this floor had done so.

Will reflected upon this with some satisfaction. He clung to his heavy burden and hurried on.

But a fearful thrill of dismay seized him when he reached the stairway beyond. It was one seething volcano.

To attempt to descend would have been suicide.

What was to be done? For one swift moment Wide Awake Will saw naught but death around him. His escape was cut off on all sides.

Will was sick and faint. He laid his burden down for a moment and leaned against the wall of the passage trying to regain his composure.

Then he thought of the roof. Perhaps if he could gain that he could make his way to the next building and so escape.

He began at once to search for the ladder which led up to it.

He found it at last, and climbing up, reached the skylight. A blow of his ax dashed this open.

He stepped out upon the flat roof of the burning hotel. He was at an enormous height from the ground.

Already flames were bursting up through the roof in various places. Will saw at once that he must act quickly.

He descended into the burning hotel, and throwing Hayden's

unconscious form across his back, attempted to climb the ladder again. It was a slow and laborious task.

But finally he reached the roof safely. He crossed it to the outer verge.

Below was the snowy street. There was a vast crowd of people, and suddenly in the light of the flames, all saw Will's tall form with his burden, outlined against the sky of pitchy blackness.

A great cheer went up. It rolled up like a boom of thunder. Will stood there a moment in indecision.

The roof of the hotel unfortunately did not join any other roof. Upon all sides were wide streets, except at one end, where there was a narrow alley.

Will made the circuit of the roof. He paused at the verge of the alley. It was perhaps fifteen feet across to the other side.

There was a possibility that Will could have leaped this, but he could not take his human burden with him.

Self-preservation is nature's first law, and it is not so terrible a thing to allow a murderer and incendiary like Hayden to meet a merited fate in the flames.

But, nevertheless, Will could not think of this.

He knew well the mighty importance of saving the villain's life. He was determined to risk his own to do it.

He went back to the verge over the street.

The fire boys were rigging ladders to reach him.

Several of these were tied together and then raised. But they did not reach within a dozen feet of the roof.

However, up this ladder of extension came Luke Tuttle. The assistant foreman was determined to risk his life to save Will's.

Up he went until at the topmost rung. He was not more than a dozen feet below Will's position.

The young fireman leaned over the edge of the roof and shouted:

"Luke, old friend, do not risk your life to save me."

"How can I help you, Will?" cried the assistant foreman.

Will hardly knew how to reply. But suddenly an idea came to him. He at once made action.

He laid Hayden's insensible form down upon the heated roof. Then he lay flat upon the verge and shouted to Luke.

CHAPTER XVII.

BRAVE RESCUES.

Every word shouted by Wide Awake Will reached Luke Tuttle's ears, in spite of the roar of the flames.

"Luke, have you got a rope?"

Instantly the other replied:

"Yes!"

"Can you pass one end of it up to me?"

Luke's face lit up with the same idea.

"I'll try!" he cried.

At his belt he carried a fireproof rope.

At once he unslung it and formed it in a coil.

Leaning far out on the ladder, he threw the coil upward. It was only a short throw, and could easily have been made under other circumstances.

But hampered as he was by his position on the ladder, he had great difficulty in getting the necessary impetus.

The coil went up and missed Will's grasp by just about a foot. It then fell back, greatly to the disappointment of both firemen.

Luke at once began to hastily coil it up again. The crowd below were watching with great intentness.

Once more Luke whirled the coil of rope above his head. Up it went, and this time reached the edge of the roof.

Will caught it just in the nick of time, and before it could fall back he had drawn it over the edge.

A great cheer went up from the crowd below, as they saw this.

They did not know who the unconscious man in Will's arms was, but they did know that the young fireman, as usual, was trying to save a human life.

Will took the rope and made a noose under Hayden's arms.

Then he leaned over the edge again and shouted:

"Hello, Luke!"

"Hello!"

"I am going to lower this fellow down to you!"

"All right!"

"Do you think you can take care of him?"

"I guess so."

"One thing more."

"Well!"

"Just as soon as you get down with him put him in the hands of officers. Look out he don't escape, for he is one of the incendiaries."

Luke Tuttle's face in the flame light showed his utter amazement.

"One of the incendiaries!" he gasped.

"Yes; I will explain all to you later when I come down."

"When will that be?"

"Just as soon as you reach the ground."

Then Will began to lower Hayden over the verge of the roof. It was a thrilling spectacle for the crowd below.

Down slowly but surely went the heavy load. Tuttle waited until it was just above his head.

Then he reached up and caught Hayden's legs. He drew him close to the ladder and threw a rope about it and the unconscious villain's body.

Then he disentangled the rope which Will had placed under the incendiary's arms. Hayden was secured to the ladder, and Luke began slowly to descend, allowing the body to slide after him gradually.

It was a slow descent, but Luke kept on. When twenty feet from the ground two other firemen sprung up and gave him ready assistance.

Thus Hank Hayden was saved from the devouring flames. The amazement of the people was great when he was placed in the charge of policeman, who took him away in a closed carriage.

All eyes were now upon Wide Awake Will, who was still in some danger.

As soon as he saw that Tuttle was off the ladder, Will took one end of the rope and passed it about a chimney near.

Securing it firmly, he began to slide over the edge of the roof. There the young fireman hung in mid-air.

It was a most perilous position, and the crowd, agape, watched him breathlessly. But he did not fall.

Will was an expert climber and not the one to lose nerve. He hung there in mid-air but a brief while.

Then he was upon the ladder. His safety seemed assured.

But flames were bursting through windows of the first story, and these seemed to make a barrier, and also threatened to destroy the ladder.

But Will could have reached the ground safely, even then, had it not been for an accident.

Suddenly a hoarse, horrified cry went up from the crowd. Everybody pointed to the second story window just a dozen yards beyond the ladder.

There, leaning over the sill, and frantically screaming for help, was a woman. Will saw that she was in deadly peril.

Smoke was pouring out above her head. Flames were capering up and down the shutters.

"My God!" thought the young fireman, "that woman is in a dreadful position; I must go to her help!"

With this he began to calculate with lightning rapidity just how to do this. Then an idea came to him.

There seemed but one way. To lower the ladders and disconnect them might be a fatal delay. Other ladders could be procured, but even that would take time.

Will was resolved to make action at once, and not wait for any such thing. The woman must be helped at once. So he leaned from the ladder, and shouted:

"Hold on, my good woman! I am coming to help you!"

Then he swung from the ladder and gripped the sill of the nearest window in the same story. He made a quick spring forward and went through the window.

He was in the burning hotel once more. The window at which was the screaming woman was two rooms distant from the one in which he now was.

Will kicked open a door into the first and nearest room. But there was no door between it and the next.

There was no way seemingly to get in there but by means of the corridor. Will started to go by this route, but flames beat him back.

It was a critical moment and a desperate situation. What was to be done? For a moment Will believed that he was lost.

Then his old time resolution and pluck returned to him. He made for the window.

Leaning out of it, he saw that his comrades were hastily preparing to hoist a ladder. The woman had disappeared.

Smoke was rising thickly from the room where she was, and Will feared that she was suffocated. He measured the distance between the windows.

There was a ledge of stone which jutted out a foot. Without a moment's hesitation the young fireman swung himself out upon that.

He clung to a part of the swinging shutter, and reaching along the heated brick wall, he grasped the frame of the other window. Even as he did so he felt the wall of the building tremble.

The fire was rapidly carrying to destruction the mammoth hotel. The interior was being rapidly gutted, and these walls must soon fall.

It was a reckless act upon Will's part to attempt to pass between the two windows. But by a miracle he succeeded.

Then he dropped into the room beyond. For a moment the smoke nigh overcame him.

To avoid this he flung himself upon the floor. With his face close to the floor, he was enabled to breathe.

Recovering himself, he groped about for the body of the woman. His hand finally encountered her dress.

In a moment Will was up, and, lifting her in his strong young arms, rushed to the window.

He flung her over the ledge and lowered her by the arms, so that her face was out of the smoke. And thus he held her there, though with his own face pressed close to the ledge, he could with great difficulty breathe.

Suddenly he felt her slipping from his grasp in spite of all.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A RASCALLY COMPACT.

Had the woman fallen that frightful distance it must have killed her. But Will hung to her just long enough.

The fire boys below had raised the ladder, and it was now near the sill. Up went Luke Tuttle and a brawny fellow fireman.

They reached the suspended woman just in the nick of time.

She dropped from Will's nerveless grasp in Luke's arms.

He lifted her like a puppet and passed her down to the man below. Then he looked up, expecting to see Will.

But the young fireman had disappeared. With the losing of his hold upon the woman the young fireman's senses had left him.

Tuttle guessed the truth at once.

"My God!" he exclaimed, with a thrill of horror, "Will is gone!"

Then a desperate resolution seized him. He ran up the ladder quickly to the verge of the sill.

Off came his coat, and Luke bound it across his mouth. Then he swung himself over the sill.

The crowd knew what he was up to, and waited with intense interest. One moment only the brave assistant foreman was out of sight.

Then he reappeared, and in his arms was a limp form. It was Wide Awake Will.

Down the ladder came Luke. But when he reached the ground scores of willing and tender hands took his burden from him.

Will quickly revived with the fresh air, and was again upon his feet. Hundreds pressed forward to congratulate him.

The young fireman thanked them all modestly, and then returned to his duties. Nor could he be persuaded to desist until the fire was under control.

One wing of the hotel was saved. By daybreak the flames were conquered.

It was now only necessary for a fresh company to remain and watch the smoldering embers.

Wide Awake Will and his colleagues were indeed glad to go home and get a good breakfast and turn in for a few hours.

The town was meanwhile in the throes of a greater excitement than it had yet known.

The burning of the Grand Hotel was certainly a dire calamity, but the wonderful report of the capture of one of the incendiaries by Wide Awake Will was what agitated the people the most.

Reporters and curious people fairly besieged the residence of the Wades.

But Mr. Needham had come down in the early morning, and he would not allow Will to be disturbed. This held all in abeyance for some hours.

Meanwhile Hank Hayden was languishing in the hospital under guard. His wound had resulted in a mild type of fever, and he was in a state of delirium.

That he was one of the incendiaries was evident by his incoherent mutterings and ravings, in which he constantly talked of firing building and robbing banks.

The morning paper came out with the following item:

"A Startling Report—It is said that one of the incendiary gang has been captured during the Grand Hotel fire by Fireman Will Wade.

"He is a brutish looking fellow, and is now in the City Hospital with a concussion of the brain caused by the impact of a glancing bullet against his hard skull.

"Who fired the bullet, or just how Wide Awake Will captured him is not known. Our reporter is now endeavoring to get the details, which will appear in a later edition."

More followed of an irrelevant character. This, of course, was mystery enough to at once arouse all of the townspeople.

But nothing more was known until Will Wade appeared on the street some hours later.

The young fireman had no sooner reached the engine house than the Marshal of Police, as well as a dozen reporters, pounced upon him.

Will told his story succinctly, and it created a fresh sensation.

"I don't know what the fellow's name is," he said, "but I know he is an incendiary because I saw him in the act of setting the fire."

But the police had already learned the identity of Hayden. A letter in his pocket betrayed him.

It was considered a famous score for the police to have at last secured one of the wretched gang.

But it was some days before Hayden came out of his fever and was lucid again. Then he was surly and refused to talk.

The hope that he would betray his pals seemed therefore a groundless one. He would not even talk.

"All right!" said the marshal. "We will see what a little confinement will do. At any rate there is one of the wretches in captivity."

People in Benton began to breathe easier.

It began to look as if, after all, there was to be an end to the incendiary work. Perhaps the arrest of this one would frighten the others away.

Among those who were the most surprised was Jeff Morse.

The young villain was in a measure dismayed, and at once sought out Sullivan and Sheehy.

The two incendiaries yet at liberty were in a by no means pleasant frame of mind. Sullivan cursed roundly.

"It is all confounded nonsense," he declared, angrily. "Hank should have been more careful. He had ought to have known better than leave his window shutters open."

"But can't you help him in some way?" asked Jeff. "You're not going back on him, are you?"

"What's the matter with you?" blurted out Sullivan. "You're just the man to do that."

"How so?" asked Jeff.

"Why, you're the mayor's son. What's your father's influence worth?"

"Ah, but they'd hang him if he undertook to take Hank's part."

"Well," said the boss of the incendiaries, reflectively, "there's a better way. Now you can get into the prison easier than any other man."

"Yes," admitted Jeff.

"Very good; then you are the man to pull Hank out of this scrape."

"Do you mean that I am to help him to escape?"

"Yes."

"I wish I could," said Jeff, slowly.

"Look here, boy," said Sullivan, earnestly, "here's a fair trade. You get Hank out of his tight quarters and we'll steal that pooty gal fer yer an' no slip up either."

Jeff looked straight at the other.

"Do you mean that?" he asked.

"I do."

"Give me your hand."

The two shook hands to seal the compact. But there was more than one reason why Jeff wanted Hayden released. He was afraid that he might turn State's evidence and implicate him, so he was determined to rescue him.

CHAPTER XIX.

JEFF INTERVIEWS HAYDEN.

Everybody was disappointed that Hayden had not been induced to turn state's evidence upon his pals.

This would have settled the incendiary matter forever. But the villain still refused to talk.

Nothing could be elicited from him.

The attempt was abandoned.

But the detectives and police were busy at work endeavoring to get a clew as to the hiding place of Hayden's pals.

Jeff Morse was in earnest in his agreement with Sullivan to attempt the rescue of Hayden.

He at once began to lay plans with that end in view.

He did not consult his father for reasons of his own. It was not his belief that the mayor would be at all in sympathy with him in such a move.

Jeff knew that it was a risky game, but he undertook it in his usual haphazard, reckless fashion.

First, he obtained a pass to visit the prison from the commissioner, which he had no trouble in doing. Then one day he leisurely strolled into the prison yard.

He had no trouble in passing the guards, as he was the mayor's son. His appearance was the cause of not the remotest suspicion.

"I'd like to take a look at that chap who is supposed to be one of the incendiaries," he said carelessly to one of the guards.

"All right, boss," replied the guard. "Just go along corridor seven, and he is in cell ten, in the first gallery."

"Thanks; I'll find him."

Jeff could hardly conceal his triumph and joy at this easy method of gaining an interview with Hayden.

He strolled along carelessly until he saw the grated door of number ten.

The incendiary was sitting upon the edge of his cot bed in a despondent way. He looked up with a start as Jeff's face darkened the cell window.

"Thunder!" he exclaimed in surprise. "Is that you?"

"Sh! Don't be too familiar," said Jeff, cautiously; "it must not be known that we are friends."

"Correct!" agreed Hayden. "Well, I'm glad somebody has come at last. I had got tired of waiting for a word of encouragement!"

"Well, I am not sure that I have brought that," said Jeff.

"Where's the other boys?"

"Keeping dark."

"What cussed hard luck I had, didn't I? That confounded bullet wound yet makes me sick. It was a close call."

"So it was," agreed Jeff. "When I heard of it I thought all was up!"

"Well, they did try to pump me pretty hard!" growled Hayden, "but they hain't succeeded in learning anything yet."

"That's right, Hank. Don't let them worm anything out of you."

"I don't know about that. By turning state's evidence I could get scott free. If you fellows propose to desert me——"

"Why, confound it!" said Jeff, angrily. "Didn't I just tell you that I had come here to help you escape?"

An eager light shone in Hayden's eyes.

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes."

"What is the plan?"

Jeff looked about cautiously to be sure that nobody was in hearing. Then he drew a small package from an inner pocket.

"Here are files and a saw and a bottle of oil," he declared.

"You can cut your bars in an hour's hard work with them."

Hayden took the package eagerly.

"That's the stuff," he whispered, "but getting out of this cell ain't all. After that is done, I've got to get out of the building."

"Wait until I tell you the rest of the plan."

"Oh, then this ain't all!"

"Oh, no."

"Good!" chuckled Hayden. "I reckoned you fellows wouldn't go back on me. Now let's have the rest of the deal."

"We propose to co-operate with you. To-morrow night at twelve there will be an explosion under the east end of this prison."

"An explosion!" gasped Hayden.

"Yes."

"What do ye mean?"

"Just that! It will be struck just to help you. While the guards are excited you must get out of your cell, and make for the west end of the prison. Mike will be on the other side to help you down!"

Hayden was excited.

"But how in thunder will you set off the gunpowder?" he asked. "How will ye get under the prison?"

"Oh, that's Sullivan's work. He has found an old sewer which leads under that end of the prison. It is half full of water. He will float in a big lot of dynamite on a small float and touch it off with a battery."

"Then I'd better have my bars all cut before twelve?"

"Yes. Don't fail, for it is your one great chance. Begin work as early as it is safe. All depends."

"And what if I fail to cut the bars?" asked Hayden, lugubriously.

"You are a goner, as well as every other prisoner in this building. The explosion will set the whole place into flames."

"Do you believe it?"

"I know it."

"That's risky," mused Hayden. "Ain't there any other plan that is safer?"

"Not another that will be likely to be successful."

"Well," said the prisoner, drawing a deep breath. "I'll take the chances of cutting the bars in time. It's all settled."

Jeff left the prison with the belief that his visit had not excited the least bit of suspicion.

He at once went to look up Sullivan and Sheehy. He found them at their dingy hiding place engaged busily in studying up the plan for blowing up the east end of the prison.

"I've seen him and all is fixed," said Jeff, triumphantly, as he entered. "I told you I could do it."

"Ye don't mean it, pard!" said Joe Sullivan eagerly. "That's good news. Then we kin strike the blow all right."

"Yes."

"Good!" cried Sheehy excitedly. "This will stir up the town worse than anything which has happened yet. By cracky; they'll understand bimeby that we chaps ain't to be fooled with."

When Jeff left the rendezvous of the incendiaries that night all was arranged for the great coup. Somehow the young villain did not feel just easy about it.

"If the explosion fails," he muttered, "or Sullivan and Sheehy are shadowed, all is lost. But I won't believe that. First, to get Hank Hayden out of that prison, then my way is clear to weave the meshes of my net about the beautiful prize, Grace Needham. Ah, I have worked hard for victory, and I can already see it in my grasp."

With a satisfied chuckle Jeff made his way to the City Hall and into the mayor's office. Mr. Morse sat there.

He was busily looking over some deeds. His face had a haggard expression as his son entered.

"Well, Jeff," he said, "you are just the person I wanted to see!"

"Well, dad," said Jeff, irreverently, "I am here. What is it?"

Mayor Morse motioned his hopeful son to a seat, and his expression was stern.

"I want to ask you a question."

"What is it?"

"What sort of company have you been keeping lately?"

Jeff looked astonished.

"What do you mean?" he asked, curtly.

"Chambers, my secretary, tells me that he has seen you in company with men of a rascally order lately. Is it true?"

"I choose my own associates," said Jeff, with dignity. "My own discernment guides me."

"Tut, tut," said the elder Morse. "You know my meaning. It is extremely necessary just at present to avoid any public criticism or condemnation. It is the best policy, you know, and we cannot afford to risk our reputation by too open intercourse with such men."

CHAPTER XX.

MORSE WILL NOT COMPROMISE.

"What men?" asked Jeff, curtly.

"Why, those rough characters my secretary saw you with!"

"Confound Chambers for a meddler!" growled Jeff. "Let him dare bring another such lying report to you as that and I'll cane him."

"It is only for the sake of caution, my lad, that I advise you to keep appointments in very secret places. We have at present a host of enemies to combat. But we shall beat them all yet."

"Well," growled Jeff, "when is that famous trial on the Eureka Gold Mine business coming off?"

"In a few days now."

"I'm mighty afraid you're going to get beat on that. That Lawyer Williams seems mighty confident."

Mayor Morse smiled contemptuously.

"I will admit that my re-election is killed by our unfortunate collision with the public sentiment in regard to that young fireman, Will Wade. But that is all owing to your reckless work in the newspapers. That has made us unpopular, Jeff. I will admit that they have beat us politically, but in regard to the gold mine: Never! Eureka is in my possession. They cannot disprove my ownership save by producing the original deed, and that——"

The elder Morse chuckled. Jeff looked searchingly at his father.

"And that?" he asked.

"Is burned in a certain fire which destroyed a block in which Wade and I once had an office. It is in ashes now."

"Well," said Jeff, with relief, "if they do not beat us in this lawsuit, I think we can yet turn the tables on them politically. Beat them in the courts and there will be a revulsion of sentiment."

"Perhaps so," agreed the elder Morse, with a crafty smile.

But at this moment a servant appeared on the threshold.

"A gentleman who wishes to see the mayor. His card."

Morse glanced at the card and gave a mighty start. Upon it was the name of Mr. Williams, the attorney-at-law.

"Ha!" thought the shrewd mayor; "he has come to me to try and make a settlement. They are bluffing well."

The next moment Lawyer Williams crossed the threshold. He bowed in a dignified way and said:

"I have come to see you upon a very important matter, your honor."

Jeff withdrew with this announcement. Morse looked at the visiting lawyer with an easy smile and said:

"I suppose it concerns the suit you have brought against me?"

"It does!"

"Ah, what do you expect to gain from that suit, may I ask?"

"Yes," replied the old lawyer, grandly. "I expect to gain the rights of a widow and her son who have been foully wronged!"

"What!" exclaimed the mayor, hotly. "Does that conceal an insinuation?"

"It conceals nothing, sir!" replied the lawyer, tartly; "the statement was a broad and open one."

"Yet it conveys an insinuation that I am the oppressor of this distressed widow and her hopeful offspring!" flashed Morse, angrily.

"Not the insinuation, sir, but, if you wish, the broad, flat denunciation."

"Sir, this is too much!" roared Morse, angrily; "you have no right to insult me in this manner. In my official capacity——"

"Hang your official capacity!" cried Williams bluntly. "Let us come to the point at once. You are sued for the right and title of the Eureka mine and its product for the last decade."

"Well?"

"You propose to defend it?"

"Yes."

"Foolish man. Let me tell you that I have the necessary evidence to overthrow you forever. This is the truth. Yet if you will honestly and peaceably give to its rightful owner an accounting of this mine, then you shall go free and escape the law if you choose. The Eureka Gold Mine is the lawful property of Mrs. Wade. I make legal demand upon you for the accounting. What do you say?"

A crafty light shone in Morse's eyes.

"You say you have the necessary evidence that I have defrauded this widow and her son?"

"I do!" replied Williams.

"What is it?"

"I do not care to state at present. If you allow this matter to come to trial then you will learn it to your sorrow."

Morse laughed contemptuously.

"Do not think for a moment, sir," he said, "that you can bluff me. You have no evidence of the kind you aver. If there ever was such it is not now in existence."

"You know very well, Alden Morse!" said Williams, sternly, "that that deed in your possession is bogus and a forgery. The Eureka Mine was never transferred to you by Wade!"

Morse looked steadily and almost mockingly at the lawyer.

"That is for you to prove!" he said, coolly. "Can you do it?"

The lawyer returned the look.

"I can!" he said firmly.

"That bluff won't work."

"We will see."

"Very well."

"Then you decline to compromise or settle with us?"

"There is nothing to settle. I shall defend my own to the last."

Lawyer Williams arose.

"This terminates the interview," he said. "I am an advocate of fair play. I have taken into consideration your hitherto exalted position in this community, and I have given you a chance. Now the consequences are upon your own head, and ruin is over you, Alden Morse. Good-day."

The door closed behind the man of law.

For a moment the mayor of Benton, the shrewd politician, sat in his chair the victim of a strange prescience.

Then he arose and went to the window and watched Williams' form down the street. He drew a deep breath like a swimmer about to dive.

"I wonder if he speaks the truth," he muttered; "has he really got the evidence to beat me out of Eureka? But that is impossible. The deed is the only evidence, and that has been destroyed. No, I am surely safe. I'll fight it out to the last."

With which fatal resolution Morse went back to his executive work.

Meanwhile Sullivan and Sheehy were busy perfecting their plans for the rescue of their pal Hayden.

"We'll make a stir in Benton this time," growled Sullivan; "they'll remember the trio as long as they live."

"You bet!" agreed Sheehy; "this is ther last go down, Joe. We'll have to skip the country after this."

"Only one more job."

"What's that?"

"You forget. We've agreed to smuggle that gal into some secret place for young Morse."

Sheehy shrugged his shoulders and uttered an oath.

"I can't say I like that sort of work," he declared. "It don't suit me. I never had any luck fooling with women. You're always sure to burn your fingers."

"But we can't go back on it."

"I suppose not."

"It'll sure be the last, though. We'll never set any more fires in Benton."

Sullivan's words were prophetic, though he did not realize it at the moment.

The sewer which extended under the east wing of the prison was really a huge drain, which carried the waters of a small brook through it also, and served the purpose of keeping it always flushed out.

The drainage reached the river a short distance beyond. Sullivan had calculated the distance to let the dynamite float drift into the conduit before calling upon the electric current to make the explosion.

The dynamite was in a small keg, and it was floated upon a couple of narrow planks. The plan was a shrewd and well laid one, and did not seem likely to fail.

The point where the brook entered the sewer was an unfrequented area, and they were not disturbed in their experiments. All was now ready.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE EXPLOSION.

When the black mantle of night shut down over Benton, few of its inhabitants dreamed of the deadly plot to liberate more than half of the prisoners in the city prison.

Will Wade was at the engine house until after ten o'clock. Carter Needham was there, and they were talking over the incidents of the trial in prospect.

"Morse would not accept any of Williams' overtures," declared Mr. Needham. "He was very uppish and refuted anything like complicity in the rascally deal."

"What will he think when the deed is brought up at the trial?" said Will.

"Ah, that will put a damper on his aspirations. He is a consummate old rascal and ought to be punished."

"There is no doubt but that this will cause his ruin."

"That is certain."

"I have little sympathy for him."

"Neither have I."

At the prison all was dark. The prisoners had retired at the usual hour, and the night guards were at their posts.

Hank Hayden at every safe and available moment was at work upon his prison bars.

He knew well what depended upon his success, and that if he did not succeed in cutting the bars before the appointed hour, all would be lost.

So he worked stealthily and with dispatch.

But yet he was hampered not a little in the fact that one of the guards was quite near the door of his cell, and would occasionally stroll down the corridor.

This delayed him not a little, and he began to fret and fume for fear that he would not get through in season.

Outside the prison Sullivan and Sheehy were rigging the float and connecting the battery.

But they were bothered not a little in the darkness.

It was not safe to use a light, for some person might be attracted to the spot.

The darkness was most intense and the cold severe. It was necessary to break away the ice about the mouth of the sewer before the float could enter.

The two incendiaries were shivering and wet, and not a little out of sorts. But at last the float was rigged.

And into the sewer it drifted.

Sullivan kept paying out on the line, and the wire. Slowly the dynamite drifted under the prison wall.

It had been intended to use one hundred yards of wire and cord. This would place the dynamite under the east wing. The explosion at this point would draw the guards from the west wing and give Hayden his chance.

But in the darkness the villains miscalculated the length of the line. They allowed it to drift too far.

Past the east wing it went, and fully one hundred feet further. This was almost exactly under Hayden's part of the building.

Then the two villains sat down to wait for the appointed hour.

At twelve o'clock the dynamite was to be exploded.

"What time is it?" asked Sheehy.

Sullivan lit a match and consulted his watch.

"A quarter to eleven!" he declared.

"An hour to wait!" ejaculated Sheehy. "We shall freeze!"

"That's so," agreed Sullivan. "I'm like an iceberg now. Look out!"

But the warning came too late.

Sheehy's foot caught in the battery wire as he attempted to rise. The next moment the two villains were ready to faint with horror.

The battery had been sprung and the result was an enormous explosion in the prison. It was like an earthquake shock, and felt all over the city.

While from the prison roof there shot an eruption like that of a volcano.

The sky was instantly lurid.

"By the fiends!" gasped Sullivan, "you've done it, Mike!"

Then they both scurried away into the gloom with all speed.

A few moments later nearly the whole population of the town were out of their beds.

The fire bells were ringing, and all was the wildest of excitement and confusion.

Will Wade had just left the engine house when the terrible shock came. He was in company with Mr. Needham.

Both paused aghast.

"My God! What was that?" cried the ex-mayor, with pallid face.

"An explosion."

"Look!"

Wide Awake Will saw the flames shooting into the air from the distant prison. At once he cried:

"The prison is blown up! There is more deviltry at work. This is horrible."

Then the young fireman rushed with all haste back to the engine house. With all speed the boys started for the fire.

They were the first on hand, and a fearful sight it was which rewarded their gaze.

The dynamite had not done any harm to the east wing as intended. But it had blown a funnel up through the main part of the west wing, destroying the outer wall, and carrying into eternity numbers of luckless prisoners and guards.

The cell in which Hayden was confined had miraculously escaped with others on that tier.

But the danger which now threatened the terror-stricken incendiary was most horrible.

Fire shot up along the walls in great searching tongues.

It threatened every moment to reach the point where he was, and roast him in his cell.

Already the heat was becoming unbearable. The wretch had been working desperately on the bars of his cell door, and he now redoubled his exertions.

But he saw that the flames must reach him before he could hope to cut the bars. He yelled, cursed and prayed in terror.

As the outer wall had fallen his position was plainly visible to the crowd in the prison yard below.

The firemen were working furiously to subdue the flames and save the apparently doomed prisoners.

But Wide Awake Will saw that some active measure must be taken. He decided to act himself.

He believed that with ladders and the warden's keys he could climb up to the iron gallery far above and rescue the prisoners.

The keys were obtained from the warden, who was near, and the ladders were hoisted.

The crowd cheered as they saw Wide Awake Will's purpose.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CONFESSION—INTO FIERY DEPTHS.

Up the ladder went Wide Awake Will to the iron gallery, off which were the prison cells, where the miserable wretches were waiting for death to overtake them.

It was a terrible risky thing to do, for at any moment the outer wall might fall.

Will was now at the top of the ladder. He placed his hand upon the iron rail of the gallery.

It was fast getting red hot.

"Save us, boss!"

"For the love of God let us out!"

"Don't leave us to burn up in this accursed place."

These were the cries with which Will was greeted. The young fireman made reply:

"Keep cool, and I'll get you out of it all right."

He had the keys which the turnkey had given him. As rapidly as possible he unlocked the first cell door.

The convict rushed out and slid down the ladder safely.

But as soon as he reached the ground, officers were ready to nab him, so that he did not escape, save from the flames.

To avoid any confusion which might be fatal, Will unlocked each door slowly, and gave each one time to get off the ladder before allowing the next to emerge.

In this way he went along the gallery.

He reached the last cell, and this was the one in which Hayden was.

Will recognized the incendiary, and said:

"I have no doubt your pals intended to burn you up. It would only be expiation of your many crimes if I were to leave you to your fate!"

Hayden's face was ashen white. He trembled like an aspen.

"Oh, for the love of God, do not do that!" he pleaded. "I will be your slave! I will do anything you say!"

"If you will do one thing for me I will save your life, and what is more, the turning of state's evidence will gain you your liberty, so that you may live a more respectable and better life."

A great change came over Hayden's pallid face. He seemed the victim of powerful emotions.

There both men stood, facing death upon the narrow iron bridge. The least move of the flames a trifle further in their direction would envelop them.

Yet Wide Awake Will was as cool and nery as though he stood safely upon the ground so far below.

"Do you mean that?" asked Hayden, huskily.

"I give you my word."

Wide Awake Will's word was good. Hayden knew this well. His manner changed to great earnestness.

"I've been a bad man in my day!" he said, "but I swear to you that I mean to be a better one. If you really mean what you say——"

"I told you once!"

"Then—I'll do it."

Hayden gripped the bars of his cell door. Will turned the key in the lock. But he faced the villain in the doorway.

"Before you go down the ladder tell me who your pals are." Hayden hesitated an instant, but quickly said:

"They are Joe Sullivan, Mike Sheehy and Jeff Morse."

Will gave a sharp cry.

"Jeff Morse?"

"Yes; the very fashionable dude. The son of the mayor of Benton. Oh, there's a little rascality in high life, you know!"

Wide Awake Will for a moment could hardly contain himself. Then he drew a deep breath and said:

"There is the ladder. Slide down quick!"

Hayden started for the ladder.

But at that moment an awful horrified cry went up from the crowd:

"Heavens! the wall is falling!"

Then there came a thunder crash.

The air was filled with smoke and dust and flames.

The two men on the gallery were lost to sight.

It seemed certain that they were buried in the debris.

It was a horrible moment, and fearful excitement swayed the crowd.

"He is lost! Wide Awake Will is lost!" was the cry. "He has met his fate at last!"

One man in the crowd was more visibly affected than the others. It was Carter Needham, the ex-mayor.

He rushed frantically through the fire line, hurling everybody aside in his way.

His lips were hard set, and his eyes had a desperate, resolute light.

"If he is under that ruin he must be pulled out!" he gritted, resolutely. "Will Wade must be saved! To think that he should sacrifice his life for such a worthless set of criminals!"

He reached the very hottest part of the street, and there suddenly a sight met his gaze which gave him a great thrill.

Wide Awake Will had not gone down to his death as was believed. He was saved by a positive miracle.

He heard the cracking of the fire under him, felt the wall falling, and knew that he must go down with it.

Hayden was half way down the ladder. Will, however, knew that it was too late to attempt escape in that manner.

He acted as quick as thought. Rushing to the railing of the gallery just at the right moment, he took a fearful leap.

Then there was a stunning shock, and he was momentarily unconscious. But only for an instant, then what seemed like instinct caused him to make a spasmodic effort to get out of the heap of debris.

He plunged forward, fell, rose again, and emerged from a cloud of smoke, just in time to meet Mr. Needham.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DISOWNED.

His garments were on fire in a dozen places, and he was terribly bruised and shaken up.

But Mr. Needham had extinguished the fire which was smoldering in his garments, and now tried to draw Will away.

But the fresh air had revived the young fireman, and he cried:

"Not yet. Where is he? Did he escape safely?"

"Whom do you mean?" exclaimed Mr. Needham; "that wretch of a convict who was the cause of all this risk upon your part?"

"The man who was with me!" cried Will.

"I don't know. I presume he is in the heap of brick and ashes yonder."

"My God! he must be saved!" cried Will, excitedly. "Stand away! I must save him!"

"You are mad!" cried Mr. Needham. "You shall not risk your life again."

"But I tell you he must be saved. He is the only man to turn state's evidence against the incendiaries. He has confessed to me!"

"Confessed to you?"

"Yes; I have the whole truth now, and incendiarism in Benton has reached its end."

Will had started excitedly along the fire line.

But the wind lifted the smoke now, and the crowd saw him. They filled the air with hoarse cheers, and genuine was the joy when it was known that the popular young fireman had escaped death.

But Will was too deeply engrossed to notice this demonstration.

He saw a number of the firemen taking a body out of the ruins.

The man appeared to be dead, and Will saw that it was Hayden.

In a moment he was by his side.

"This man's life must be saved," he cried; "he is one of the incendiaries and will give evidence against the others."

A physician was already bending over Hayden. He looked up and said:

"Do you mean that he has a confession to make?"

"Yes," replied Will.

"Then he must use all haste, for he is mortally injured. He has not an hour to live."

"My God!" exclaimed Will. "The confession must not be lost. Will he be able to make it?"

The man of medicine sprang up.

"Bring a litter!" he cried; "he must be taken to a better place. I will try my best."

A litter was quickly brought and Hayden was removed to a room in a house near by.

Here he was gently cared for. For a time it seemed impossible to bring him out of the stupor.

But at length he revived and soon the physician beckoned to those who were in waiting.

Several of the city officials were present to hear the confession and among them was the mayor, Alden Morse. He little dreamed of the shock in store for him.

"I am about to die, I reckon," said Hayden, in a reckless sort of way, "and I might as well make absolute confession. I am one of the gang of three incendiaries."

Then he made a detailed confession as to the firing of certain buildings in various parts of the city, and also named them one by one.

All this was taken down, when suddenly Alden Morse, who seemed to wish to make himself conspicuous in the affair, said sharply:

"Remember, sir, you are on your dying bed, and falsehood is out of place. We want the truth, and nothing but the truth."

Hayden's filmy gaze was turned upon him, and a sudden latent fire seemed to seize him. With a hoarse exclamation he raised one finger and pointed it at Morse.

"You are mayor of Benton, but your own son was one of us. He helped with his own hands to fire that tenement the night

of the fireman's ball. Don't accuse me of falsehood. If Joe and Mike have to go up let Jeff Morse go too, for I swear it by all the saints he was one of us!"

Alden Morse sprang back as if dealt a terrible blow, and his face turned ashen pale.

It was not at repugnance at the thought of his son's affiliating with these criminals. He had suspected this all along.

He saw nothing but ruin and disaster surging all about him.

There he cowered for a moment, pallid and aghast, before the denunciation of the dying man.

Then he hissed:

"It is false! It is preposterous!"

But he was glad a few moments later to slink from the spot, and go back to his office. There he at once set to work to prepare for the crash which he knew was inevitable.

Hayden lived, as the surgeon had predicted, scarcely an hour longer.

Meanwhile Alden Morse, in his office in City Hall, was doing all in his power to straighten matters out to his advantage.

"They will fasten onto Jeff," he said, with a singular lack of paternal solicitude, "but they mustn't trip me. It will be a case of erring son and sorrowing father, and will soon blow over. I will yet win. They cannot turn the tables on me yet."

Thus, chuckling and congratulating himself blindly, he worked away at his papers, when suddenly the door opened.

Jeff Morse came wildly rushing in.

"What's all this I hear, dad?" he asked, excitedly. "They do say that Hank Hayden has turned state's evidence, and——"

"He has mixed your name up with the others," said the elder Morse, in a rasping voice. "I suppose you remember what I told you about associating with those fellows, Jeff?"

"Then we're ruined!" cried Jeff, desperately. "I've got to skip the country!"

Alden Morse did not lift his head.

"I think you had better," he said.

There was a coolness in his voice and manner which nettled Jeff.

"Well," he said, sharply, "you don't seem to accord me much advice or sympathy."

"I am not sure that you deserve it."

Jeff started as if struck a blow.

"What?" he gasped. "You talk to me in that way? I cannot say that I like that! You're not going back on your own son?"

"In what way can I help you?"

"By giving me money. I must skip the country at once, or languish a dozen years in prison."

There was a moment of silence.

Then the elder Morse laughed harshly.

"You ask me for such great favors," he said, "when you have been the cause of bringing all this ruin down upon me. No, you can hoe your own row. The world will look upon me as a wronged father, upon you as an erring son. Go where you will, do what you please. I am done with you!"

Jeff Morse could hardly believe his senses. Yet he understood his father's sordid nature well enough to know that he meant every word he spoke.

For a moment a murderous hatred crept into his heart.

That his own father, of whom he was flesh and blood, should thus forsake him, aroused all the venomous passions of his nature.

"Then you cast me off," he said slowly, "simply because I have failed in my schemes, and you mean to win your way back into public esteem by sacrificing me. And you are my father."

"Well, have done with this eternal babble," cried the elder villain, savagely; "have I not told you all? Now go!"

But Jeff folded his arms and stood immovable in the center of the floor.

"No!" he said, desperately. "I will stay here and stand arrest. Then I will have my revenge upon you by swearing that the deed of Eureka Gold Mine, which you have, is a rank forgery, which you know it to be."

Alden Morse sprang up with a hissing cry. His eyes had the glare of a murderer.

"What!" he hissed. "You will dare to do that? Then, by heavens, I will kill you!"

But before he could carry his threat into execution the door opened unceremoniously. Six officers strode into the room.

"Jeff Morse, we want you," said the foremost, slipping manacles upon his wrists; "you are our prisoner."

Jeff stood like a statue while this was being done, glaring at his father. The elder Morse turned his back coldly.

"Father," said Jeff, in a tense voice, "are you going to help me?"

"I have helped you more than you deserve," said the mayor, frigidly. "A son who has erred as you have deserves no further sympathy."

Then Jeff Morse was led away to prison to await the sentence of the law which he so richly deserved.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHICH IS THE END.

For some days public sentiment in Benton partook of as many colors as the famous coat of Joseph.

There were a few who believed that Alden Morse was also in league with the incendiaries. Others believed him innocent and a misjudged man.

Thus public opinion, like a weather vane, veered now this way, now that. But the true revelation was close at hand.

The day of the trial was fast approaching.

Morse had procured the best counsel in Benton to defend him. He felt confident of victory.

"They cannot disprove the deed of Eureka, save by producing the original deed," he muttered, "and that is not in existence."

But Lawyer Williams smiled, and intimated to his nearest friends:

"There will be no trial. Morse has no case whatever."

Meantime Jeff and the other two incendiaries languished in prison.

The plot of abduction had failed, and pretty Grace Needham was now forever safe from the machinations of her foe.

But Alden Morse expressed no sympathy for his son. Nor did he visit him or send him word of condolence.

Burning with the injustice of this thing, and the lack of paternal instinct in his father, Jeff was hot for revenge.

There was in his nature the same sordid, murderous proclivity. He lost sight of all motives of a righteous sort in his desire to gain revenge.

"The mean old curmudgeon!" he hissed; "I'll settle accounts with him!"

So he sent a note to Mr. Needham, asking for an interview. It was granted, and the young traitor undertook to betray his father.

But Mr. Needham arose with dignity, and said:

"I can see that your motive is one of despicable revenge upon your father. Therefore I decline your evidence. We have sufficient without it!"

And this was proved the day that the trial was called. Alden Morse did not go down to the court room, but remained in his office.

His instructions to his counsel were not to send for him unless his testimony was needed. He considered his case won.

But imagine his consternation when a startling message came from Hunt, his lawyer, an hour later.

Thus it read:

"Dear Morse:

"The case opened, and for a few moments I had it all my own way. But Williams popped up with the original deed, all properly witnessed and proven. This makes yours a forgery, as the mine was in the name of Mrs. Wade, and your deed reads from Mr. Wade. You know now what action to take better than I do. Yours,

HUNT,

"Attorney-at-Law."

A few minutes later two officers rapped upon the door of the mayor's office. They entered, but the bird had flown.

Alden Morse was unable to face the music, and collecting such ready cash as he could, he had departed for parts unknown.

No effort was made to overtake him. His punishment was considered sufficient.

But there was a great revolution socially, politically and financially in Benton.

Mrs. Wade and her brave and popular son Will came into their rightful ownership of Eureka.

This made of Wide Awake Will one of the richest young men in the town. A few days after his good fortune was established Will stood face to face with beautiful Grace Needham in her father's house.

In answer to an ardent query she replied:

"Will, your prediction that you would win fame and fortune by fighting the flames has come true. But were you once more only Wide Awake Will, the poor young fireman, I would love you just as dearly and wed you just as quickly. I am always yours."

In the spring Mr. Carter Needham was unanimously elected mayor, and served faithfully for many years.

But Wide Awake Will did not resign his position upon No. 3. He was an honorary if not an active member, and no power can withhold him from duty still when he hears the clang of the fire bells.

Sheehy and Sullivan were sentenced to long terms, and they, with Jeff Morse, are yet languishing in prison, and this brings to an end our story of Wide Awake Will; or, Fighting the Flames for Fame and Fortune.

THE END.

Read "JACK WRIGHT AND HIS ELECTRIC TRICYCLE; OR, FIGHTING THE STRANGLERS OF THE CRIMSON DESERT," by "Noname," which will be the next number (270) of "Pluck and Luck."

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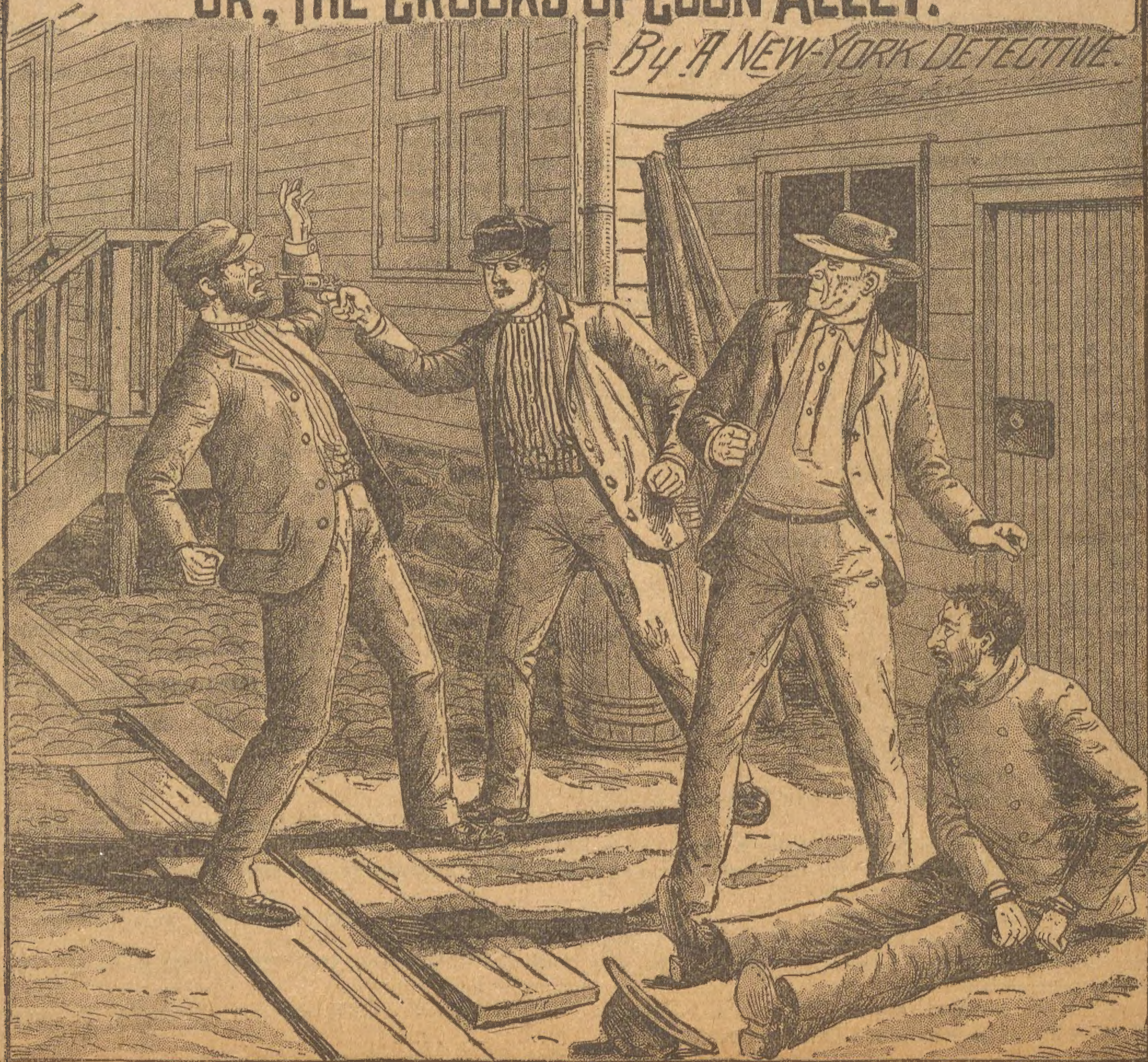
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